PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 493 (Part 1)

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2008–2009

COMPRISING PERIOD
1 June 2009—12 June 2009

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-FOURTH PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 11 MAY 2005]

FIFTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 493**

NINTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2008-2009

House of Commons

Monday 1 June 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Human Rights Legislation

1. **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford) (Con): What his policy is on the application of human rights legislation to service personnel on the battlefield. [277533]

3. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby) (Con): What guidance he issues to armed forces personnel on operations on their obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998. [277535]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Hutton): We are strongly committed to protecting the human rights of our armed forces. However, the implications of the recent Court of Appeal judgment in the case arising from the tragic death of Private Jason Smith could open the door to routine legal challenges against the Ministry of Defence to decisions made by service personnel entrusted with the conduct of operations. The Chief of the Defence Staff has made these concerns clear in his own message to the armed forces. I am urgently considering the matter, and will decide shortly whether we need to appeal the decision to the House of Lords.

Mr. Burns: What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the number of retrospective claims that may be brought against the Department in the light of the recent Court of Appeal judgment?

Mr. Hutton: I have not made any assessment of that; it is not clear to me that the judgment would have retrospective effect. That would have to be examined initially as part of the careful consideration that lawyers in the Ministry need to give the judgment. However, my real concern is whether we can stand aside and see bold decision making by battlefield commanders inhibited by anxiety about a legal process over which they will have no say and no control. Those are very serious matters. We have a clear duty of care to our soldiers, sailors and airmen, which we intend to discharge fully, but the case raises a set of issues that are complicated and fundamental. That is why it is right that—with your permission, Mr. Speaker, and that of others—we take time to consider it carefully.

Mr. Robathan: I am sure that the House wishes to send its condolences to Jason Smith's family; it is a tragic case. However, although we wish the Government well, I fear that the problem is one of the Government's own making, through their human rights legislation. There is no greater breach of human rights than being shot on the battlefield—and that is what we expect our soldiers to go out and risk. What exactly are the Government planning to do, beyond appeal? If the law stands, will not the Government have to change it to rectify the situation?

Mr. Hutton: I do not want to indulge in hypotheticals, but I cannot resist the temptation. If we were to lose the appeal and the current interpretation of the law were confirmed, it would pose us a serious problem, which would have to be addressed. I personally do not believe

that the framers of the European convention had it in mind when it was drafted that it would ever apply to soldiers in a battlefield situation. If I am wrong, and if the House of Lords took a different decision if we appealed, Ministers would have to consider seriously the position that would then arise.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): This is a very serious matter, and I urge the Secretary of State to consider wisely and make an appeal as necessary. We are witnessing the possibility of sending serving soldiers into battle with no guns or other weapons, and with their hands tied behind their backs. It is an impossible situation—unless we can enforce human rights codes on the opposition, such as Hezbollah or the Taliban; that would be a step in the right direction. In the meantime we must treat the matter seriously and regard it as a matter of high principle for the Government, and ensure that our soldiers have the proper protection that they need when going to war on our behalf.

Mr. Hutton: I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend's point. When our troops are committed to battle, the public want and expect only one thing: that they can do everything they need to do to win the battles that they are fighting. Anything that makes it harder to win the fights that they are in must be resisted strongly. Without allowing my hon. Friend to draw me any further, I can say that we are still examining the judgment carefully, and we will decide shortly whether to appeal.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I note from the press that companies such Capita, Manpower and Serco are forming a disorderly queue to get the plum £100 million contract for outsourced recruitment of people into our forces. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that, given their lack of knowledge of service life, that contract will not be extended to promote the ideas of human rights legislation in a battlefield context, about which they know equally little?

Mr. Hutton: I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting that point into this exchange. There is no question of private contractors being employed in a battlefield environment, so I am not sure whether my hon. Friend's concerns are likely to materialise.

Patrick Mercer (Newark) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that military lawyers and senior commanders have already started work fully to appreciate the tactical and strategic implications, should the judgment pass into law?

Mr. Hutton: Yes.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I would like to express the condolences of the Opposition to the family of Private Smith, and also to the families of those who have fallen since we last met. They gave their young lives in the service of our country, and their sacrifice must never be forgotten. The Minister of State has said that the Court of Appeal's judgment of 19 May has serious implications for our ability to conduct military operations overseas. Given the Secretary of State's belated fears for operational effectiveness, could he say what representations his predecessors made when his Government were falling over themselves to incorporate the European convention on human rights into the Human Rights Act?

Mr. Hutton: I think that human rights legislation is important. It has helped to embed a human rights culture in the United Kingdom and in our judiciary, which is very important. With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that the solution to the problem is to repeal the Human Rights Act. The European convention was always justiciable through the route of the European Court of Human Rights, so that would be a false path to tread. The problem has arisen because of subsequent interpretations of the parameters of the convention, not because of the Human Rights Act. The difficulty for us all in this House is that when we start down a road with a clear understanding of where we think the parameters lie, but then find that someone has moved those parameters, that poses a set of challenges about judgments that we may have to make in the House at some point in the future. None the less, that is the right way to see the problem—not to try, as the hon. Gentleman has, to put the blame on this Government, who rightly took the step of enacting the convention in the Human Rights Act.

Piracy

2. **Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect shipping around the horn of Africa from piracy. [277534]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): The UK takes the protection of merchant shipping very seriously, and many personnel, both in the UK and overseas, are engaged in activities relating to the suppression of piracy around the horn of Africa. This includes the provision of command and control functions for both UK and international military vessels. We are working with the UK shipping industry, other Departments and international partners to co-ordinate, educate and support merchant shipping in the region.

Mark Pritchard: With the Santa Maria in 1961, the Achille Lauro in 1985, the attempted hijacking of the Seabourn Spirit in 2005 and the attempted hijackings of other cruise ships in the past few weeks, how confident is the Minister that the British travelling public, who form the vast majority of cruise ship passengers, are safe off the horn of Africa? Obviously we are talking about pirates now, but they could well graduate from commercial ships to cruise ships.

Mr. Ainsworth: There has been a big increase in the number of patrols: there are not only those run by the European Union; many other nations have also been participating. Even though most of those other nations are not prepared to fall under the command of others, they are more than happy to co-operate and ensure that what is being done is properly co-ordinated and therefore most effective. There is also a big operation involving the exchange of information from the United Kingdom in Northwood to ensure that we can pass information between nations safely and securely, so as best to attack

the problem of piracy. Piracy is a real problem around the horn of Africa, but it will not be solved entirely in the maritime area.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Can my right hon. Friend tell us what he knows about the involvement of the Kenyan armed forces in the work of defeating piracy in the horn of Africa? I was in Kenya last October and many parliamentarians there were concerned about the situation, so I wonder where we stand now.

Mr. Ainsworth: We should be enormously grateful to the Kenyan Government for the assistance that they have been giving us and for being prepared, in some circumstances, to bring those accused of piracy to justice in the Kenyan legal system. Kenya is directly affected by piracy, which attacks trade to Kenya. Indeed, a lot of the World Food Programme supplies to parts of Somalia come through Kenya; those ships have been targeted and are at risk too.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Increasing numbers of ransoms are being paid, and the pirates are now investing that money in better equipment and better weaponry. Does the Minister share my concern that if the problem is not nipped in the bud, the situation will escalate to the extent that many more people may be killed?

Mr. Ainsworth: I am sorry to say that it is a bit late to nip the problem in the bud as the hon. Gentleman suggests. It has been going on for some time now, and the amount of activity and the preparedness of the pirates to go further out to sea to attack vessels—right out into the Indian ocean, for example—make it extremely difficult to offer full protection over such vast areas of sea. The reactions of the international shipping organisations need to be properly thought through. Their governance of their ships, and their preparedness to co-operate in the channelling of shipping that now takes place, and to accept our advice, ought to reduce the problem. We believe that this activity has led to an increase in the number of unsuccessful attacks, but in the past those organisations have been prepared to offer ransoms, which are hugely attractive to the individuals involved. It is hard to put in place sufficient deterrents to counteract the attraction of such large amounts of money.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that if the Royal Navy comes under armed attack from pirates, it is entitled to use lethal force immediately? Will he also confirm that if the Royal Navy captures armed pirates, there is no longer any risk of their claiming asylum, and that they will instead be handed over to the nearest appropriate jurisdiction?

Mr. Ainsworth: We have looked into that question, and made sure that the Royal Navy has rules of engagement sufficient for the tasks that we ask it to do. In any circumstances, it can always defend itself if it comes under attack. The hon. Gentleman knows that to be true, because he knows a considerable amount about this subject. We have no intention of providing a taxi service for asylum seekers through the Royal Navy. We have received the co-operation of countries in the area—Kenya, in particular, as I have said—in bringing these people to justice. We will take robust action, and we are also helping with the biggest single effort being made at the moment—the co-ordination of the many different nations operating in the area. There are Russian and Chinese ships in the area, as well as those of NATO countries, and they are all prepared to co-operate and to co-ordinate their activities. The Royal Navy has provided a superb facility in assisting and enabling that co-operation to take place.

Afghanistan

4. **John Robertson** (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): What plans he has for the future provision of military equipment to service personnel in Afghanistan; and if he will make a statement. [277536]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Quentin Davies): We plan to continue to supply our troops in Afghanistan with the best possible equipment: personal equipment, weapons and communication systems, as well as intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance—ISTAR—assets, armoured vehicles, helicopters, electronic countermeasures and all the rest. Highlights this year so far have been the delivery to theatre of Mastiff 2, Ridgback and Panther. I hope that in the next couple of months we shall deliver Jackal 2, and in the course of the year we shall make more Chinooks available for deployment in Afghanistan, as well as the first Merlins to be used there. Early next year, the new upgraded Lynxes will be delivered.

John Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend for that extensive answer. He will be aware of the comments by Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the Army, who said that he was worried about the distant future and the need to "muddle through" that might arise in respect of the weapons that are to be sent to the Army. He also said that the weapons were not up to the standard required, and that they arrived too late. Has my hon. Friend had any discussions with Sir Richard, and if so, what was the outcome?

Mr. Davies: I have regular discussions with Sir Richard Dannatt, a man for whom I have the greatest admiration and regard. He is a very fine officer—and I have to say that I think that he has been misquoted by my hon. Friend. I am quite certain that he did not say those things about the weapons that we are delivering to Afghanistan being inappropriate. As for their being too late, I have just given an example of how we are delivering weapons systems and other equipment remarkably rapidly, sometimes within six months of the order going out to the supplier.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): May I ask a question about helicopters? Incidentally, I am delighted that RAF Odiham in my constituency has been reprieved, and I hope that it now faces a long period of stability and investment. I want to ask about helicopters in the coming period. In the next three or four years, as old helicopters are phased out and before new ones have come on stream, there is likely to be a reduction in the availability of helicopters. What do the Government propose to do about that gap?

Mr. Davies: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his advocacy of RAF Odiham, for which he is famous in the House, and I am glad that he is happy with the news of the latest developments. As for helicopters, I look forward to discussing that matter in greater detail with the Defence Committee, to which I have been invited, tomorrow. As I think he knows, we are looking at a series of possible upgrades and life extension programmes for our existing fleet of helicopters, as well as focusing on the need for the future medium helicopter. Decisions on all these matters will be taken in the coming months. It will give me great pleasure to go through some of the issues with the right hon. Gentleman tomorrow, if he so wishes. As I frequently say—internally and, increasingly, externally—when it comes to helicopters, I am interested in outputs rather than inputs. Since November 2006—if I have the figures absolutely correct—we have succeeded in achieving an 80 per cent. increase in the helicopter hours available to commanders in Afghanistan. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman regards that, as I do, as a fine achievement and a positive step in the right direction.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the problems experienced with rucksacks that are ill-fitting with the body armour that we supply to our armed forces in Afghanistan have now been resolved? Does he agree that in dealing with problems like this, it is imperative to act quickly?

Mr. Davies: I am totally with my hon. Friend on that latter point. Yes, we have looked into issues surrounding the burden of rucksacks in relation to the armour and so forth. It is an enormously important issue, because our troops have to carry enormous weights in very hot conditions, and I am concerned to ensure that we do everything possible continually to improve their personal equipment. The whole procurement function, as I see it, is one of managing continuing improvement. We have to remain flexible, we have to remain alert, and we have to ensure that everything we do gets better all the time. That has indeed been the story of our recent achievement, and we will continue it further. In the course of the next couple of months I shall be in Afghanistan again, and I shall talk, as I have before, individually to many people in all ranks about their issues with equipment, including the personal equipment to which my hon. Friend referred, and what they feel about all aspects of it.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Minister will be well aware of the considerable overstretch that our troops face in Afghanistan, so can he update the House and tell us whether he has had any success in persuading other European members of NATO to supply more military equipment for our forces out there?

Mr. Davies: I do not accept the hon. Lady's characterisation of the situation as one of overstretch. Of course, our forces have been under considerable stretch recently—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] "Overstretch" implies that our troops are being asked to undertake tasks that they are not able to undertake, which has not been the situation. The distinction between stretch and overstretch is very important, and I hope that she recognises it. Furthermore, with the end of our operations in Iraq, the stretch and the stress have been reduced. The hon. Lady will know that our last combat troops came back from Iraq just last week—indeed, I was privileged to be at RAF Honington when the RAF Regiment returned after a gallant deployment—so she is looking at the issue from the wrong angle. That said, yes, we have made considerable progress in persuading our NATO allies to make further contributions. The French, for example, have doubled theirs from 2,000 to 4,000 troops.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I was very glad to hear my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) mentioning the weight of the personal equipment that our service personnel have to carry. Will the Minister tell the House a little more, particularly about body armour and the personal electronic countermeasures equipment, which seem to be the two main sources of the problem? What is being done to try to reduce the weight of those particular items?

Mr. Davies: A great deal of work is being done to improve the armour. I believe that our Osprey armour is the best armour available to anyone in the world today. We would like to improve it further and make it more effective; at the same time—there are obviously trade-offs to be made here—we would like to make it lighter if we can. We are making a continuing effort on electronic counter-measures, but I hope that my hon. Friend recognises that it would be in nobody's interest—least of all that of our troops deployed in Afghanistan—for me to go into the details in public.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): We are indeed looking forward to seeing the Minister before the Select Committee tomorrow. We just hope that he will allow time for us to ask the questions.

Apart from the helicopters, what equipment is being reassigned from Iraq to Afghanistan?

Mr. Davies: I may say to the hon. Gentleman that when I appear before a Select Committee, I regard the time involved as a matter for the Committee. I shall be there for as long as the Committee requires me to be there.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, probably the most important asset to be reassigned from Iraq to Afghanistan immediately—or at least within a few months, after some maintenance and upgrade work—will be the Merlins. A number of other individual items of equipment may go to Afghanistan, but no precise decisions have been made about that yet.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Concerns remain about the loss of lives as a result of improvised explosive devices. Can my hon. Friend say any more about the urgency that he attaches to the provision of greater armour for vehicles to protect our troops from explosions of that kind?

Mr. Davies: As my hon. Friend probably recognised, many of the vehicles that I listed earlier are new generation. Mastiff 2 will follow Mastiff 1, Jackal 2 will follow Jackal 1 within the next couple of months, and Snatch Vixen will follow Snatch. Each of those developments involves a considerable enhancement in the survivability and protection afforded by the vehicles concerned. It is clear that there is no way in which a vehicle can be

protected against absolutely any level of blast—and, sadly, that there is no way in which we can engage in armed conflict without losing troops. That is a tragic but, I am afraid, inescapable fact. We make continual efforts to improve our game, re-examining our tactics and counter-measures and trying to make them more effective, and we are succeeding—although, as I have said, I will not talk about that in public for obvious reasons. We are providing a new and ever-enhanced series of armoured vehicles and other forms of protection, and I look forward to reporting to the House on further improvements in future.

Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): In the light of reports that American-fired enhanced-blast munitions may have caused 140 civilian deaths in an air strike on 4 May, can the Minister guarantee that British munitions, which have been used 43 times in the last year, have not killed civilians in Afghanistan? What precautions are we taking to ensure that they do not? Can pilots really see whether civilians are in target buildings? Does the Minister understand the fear that the use of such indiscriminate weapons might undermine the popular civilian support that is so essential to NATO's operation?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great regard and who I know to be a considerable expert on military matters, uses terms that I am surprised to hear him use in this context. He knows that none of the NATO forces involved operate indiscriminately in any way. The word is completely inappropriate.

I cannot comment on the specific American operation to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. Obviously I know nothing about it, because it does not fall within my direct responsibility. I can, however, tell him that enormous attention is paid by British forces to the need to avoid collateral damage and civilian deaths. In an armed conflict, as ever in the whole of human history, that can never be achieved 100 per cent., but we make great efforts. It is a difficult and serious trade-off—particularly given that someone may put their own personnel at risk by not taking action that they might otherwise have taken in defence of our own operations, or our own troops, because of a fear of civilian deaths or collateral damage.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Does the Minister agree with the former Secretary of State, who described the Pinzgauer Vector as

"an excellent solution to our soldiers' requirements",

or does he now accept that, at a cost of more than £100 million, it was a massive defence acquisition fiasco—as some of us on the Conservative Benches have pointed out, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Ann Winterton)? If so, what has he done to improve the technical evaluation process to restore our troops' confidence in the acquisition process? That is the very least that they should expect from the Government.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman should wake up a bit, get with it and start to look at the realities of life. The fact of the matter is that those who invest in a portfolio of armoured vehicles, as we are doing—or, indeed, in a range of equipment for any purpose in this world—will want to ensure that they have the best, in terms of meeting different mobility, capability, fire power, protection and other requirements. We will inevitably have some vehicles that are less effective than others; we will inevitably have some successes and some failures—that is what a portfolio policy is all about, by the way. Vector was not a success and it is being withdrawn. Its problem has been its "operationability": it has great difficulty carrying some of the loads that it is required to carry on the Afghan terrain. It has not been able to live up to expectations there, and we will be replacing it with the new tactical support vehicles that we have ordered—the Coyote, the Husky and the Wolfhound—which I have mentioned in the House in different contexts. That is one more example of this steady process of flexibility, improvement and enhancement, which is the policy to which we are committed.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

5. **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): What contribution the Government are making to the MONUC peacekeeping force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [277537]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): We are making a valuable contribution to the United Nations mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—MONUC—by deploying experienced officers into key posts, with their agreement. We will shortly be increasing our contribution to seven officers with the addition of a two-star deputy force commander.

Mary Creagh: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. The all-party group on the great lakes region and genocide prevention recently met Alan Doss, the new head of MONUC forces in the DRC. One of the issues that he raised with us was the need for US and UK security services to share intelligence with MONUC better if we are to track down the dissident groups operating in the east of the country. It is imperative that that intelligence is shared if security is to be restored in the east of the DRC, where Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, the CNDP, and the Hutu militia force, the FDLR, are still causing chaos and huge humanitarian disruption.

Mr. Ainsworth: Obviously, we share my hon. Friend's desire to see the disruption in the DRC brought to an end and the humanitarian crisis that has flowed from it reduced and stopped. I am not aware of difficulties in the sharing of appropriate intelligence. If she has any information in that regard that she wishes to pass on to me, I will look into it and try to ensure that, where appropriate, we give people any information that we have that would be useful to that end.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): It is good news that we are giving money to the Conflict Prevention Pool, and a certain number of key people and a certain amount of funding to MONUC; I believe that it is nearly 10 per cent. of its funding. Does the Minister agree that unless other UN member states with reasonable lift capacity are willing to contribute, with a degree of leadership, to initiatives, be it MONUC in the DRC or those in Darfur, we simply will not make progress? These peacekeeping operations appear to be just marking time: we are not making progress and there is not the required grip, because member states that could give that grip of leadership are not participating.

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the vast spaces involved in conducting operations in Africa mean that the need for strategic and tactical lift and helicopter capability in theatre is of particular importance, and that those are restricting factors in terms of our ability to have sufficient impact in places such as Darfur and the DRC. I hope to discourage him from suggesting that we, with the commitments that our people have at the moment, can provide that capability ourselves, but we will obviously do what we can to encourage others to do so.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that one of the problems is that the militia groups and the armed forces operating in the eastern DRC are, in effect, funded by illicit mining operations? Huge sums flow tax-free out of the Congo, and then flow back in for the purpose of buying arms that kill and maim people. I realise that this is slightly beyond his remit, but can he speak to trade Ministers and Foreign Office Ministers to see what can be done to close off that flow?

Mr. Ainsworth: I agree with my hon. Friend that there is no doubt that one of the motives for people to get involved in the area is the exploitation of minerals and other natural resources. We must all do everything that we can to prevent that from happening and to ensure that the regulations make that exploitation—and the humanitarian catastrophe that flows from it—not profitable as it has been in the past. I will do as my hon. Friend asks and see to it that we do all that we can in that regard.

Afghanistan

6. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): When he next expects to meet his EU and NATO counterparts to discuss the conflict in Afghanistan. [277538]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Hutton): I regularly discuss Afghanistan with my European Union and NATO counterparts. On 10 June, I shall attend a meeting of nations that are contributing to operations in Regional Command (South). On 11-12 June, I shall attend a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers.

Mr. Bellingham: I understand that at the recent NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Poland in February, the Secretary of State said that it was crucial that as many European NATO members as possible sent more helicopters to Afghanistan. He said at the time that he was confident that that would happen. How many extra helicopters have now been sent?

Mr. Hutton: I think that there are only three, from the Czech Republic, which is making available some of its helicopters under the helicopter initiative. As the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) has said, it is important to recognise that we are deploying more helicopters to Afghanistan later this year to support our troops, and that is right and proper. On a wider level it is imperative—as I have made clear many times—that NATO do more in Afghanistan. I was very pleased that at the Strasbourg meeting Poland, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Germany and Australia—our true friend and ally—said that they would support operations in Afghanistan with more troops. That has to be good news for the success of the operation.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): Does not the Secretary of State understand the gravity of this singular failure of NATO? This was supposed to be an article 5 operation, and people were supposed to step up to the plate with mutual assistance, but that has not happened. That is the case against the backdrop of the House of Commons never giving a mandate for our commitment in Helmand. My right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid) made the announcement in a statement one day, and most of us had never even heard of Helmand. We have had drift on this matter and it is now time that the commitment made by Tony Blair and the present Prime Minister—that we commit our armed forces only after a conscious decision by this House—was respected. That has not happened, and there is no mandate for this operation to go on.

Mr. Hutton: I agree with the first part of my hon. Friend's question. NATO needs to do more and we have made that clear. I am glad that NATO is responding to President Obama's request for more military assistance to the Afghan Government, as that is long overdue, but better late than never. Can we do more? Yes, of course we should, and we will continue to argue for that.

On my hon. Friend's latter point, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made his views very clear on how we should proceed in the future.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): Is it not the case that the vital currency of our reputation has been undermined by the Prime Minister not accepting the recommendation by the Chief of the Defence Staff that 4,000 extra troops should be sent to Helmand if we are to do the job properly? Does that not affect our credibility when dealing with the Americans and other NATO allies?

Mr. Hutton: I agree very strongly with the hon. Gentleman that our reputation matters a great deal to us, and it is with great reluctance that I contradict what he says. I assure him that there was no suggestion that we send 4,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. The Chief of the Defence Staff—who is my principal military adviser, as he is the Prime Minister's—is content with the decisions that the Prime Minister has made, and we are now busy operationalising that in the most effective way possible.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend has had a chance to read *The New York Times* today, but it contains an important article by a distinguished correspondent entitled "U.S. Gives Absolution to its Allies". The article makes the argument that the US no longer wants to open a second front against European allies who are not engaging in fighting and killing, but instead wants a team effort. It is changing the nature of its operations in Afghanistan, not to step up a huge kinetic war, but to find political as much as military solutions, and Britain is playing a leading part in that. Can we therefore have an end to the European bashing and an understanding—as was evident at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly—that the US and its European allies are talking and working as one?

Mr. Hutton: The strategy that we are pursuing in Afghanistan is not a purely military one. It is a comprehensive approach that has a necessary military component to it, because there cannot be greater security, and therefore the opportunity for the Afghan Government to deliver to greater effect in Afghanistan, unless there is improved security. As my right hon. Friend has correctly said, that military component is combined with an approach that emphasises the development of civilian capabilities and capacity, too. The Europeans are making a significant contribution to that. My criticism of the NATO effort so far is a matter of record and I do not resile from a word that I have said, but I am glad and pleased that the NATO military effort in Afghanistan has now increased, which I consider to be absolutely essential if we are to achieve the wider goals of peace and security in that troubled country.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Will the Secretary of State list the countries in the European Union that have deployed ground forces to southern Afghanistan?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I will: Romania, the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia and Belgium, and France is flying fast jets in the south of Afghanistan.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): As things stand today, does the Secretary of State believe that British forces in Afghanistan have an adequate number of troops, adequate funding and the right equipment to succeed in the mission that they have been given? In particular, is he happy that when we take territory we can hold it and initiate reconstruction quickly and successfully enough?

Mr. Hutton: I believe that we have sufficient troops; I believe that we have sufficient equipment; and I believe that we have sufficient resources. That is not just my view; it is view of the chiefs of staff.

Dr. Fox: A large number of the military seem to take a different view. Compared with this time last year, there has been a 55 per cent. increase in coalition deaths, including those of British soldiers, and a 90 per cent. increase in attacks on the Afghan Government. Since January, there have been more than twice as many insurgent-initiated attacks in Helmand as next door in Kandahar. In the light of a clearly deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the challenges in Pakistan, is it not time that we undertook a full and comprehensive review of the strategy we are pursuing with our NATO allies and the regional players to determine a way forward? Do they all understand that failure in Afghanistan would both damage NATO and provide a shot in the arm for every extremist across the globe? Why is NATO not working?

Mr. Hutton: I agree with the hon. Gentleman: failure in Afghanistan is not an option. Our military effort in Afghanistan must succeed, as must our wider comprehensive approach in Afghanistan. We regularly review the strategy—the Prime Minister has made that clear—and we published a recent review of it. We remain committed to reviewing constantly the military and the wider civil and political campaigns in which we are involved in Afghanistan, and I take it from the hon. Gentleman's question that he wants significantly to enhance military deployment to Afghanistan.

Training (New Equipment)

7. **Mr. David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What procedures are in place to provide that troops receive training on new equipment before deployment to theatre with such equipment. [277539]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): All business cases, including urgent operational requirements, are structured to provide equipment to meet our training needs. However, urgent theatre equipment needs sometimes rightly take priority over training requirements. We have made improvements in providing theatre-standard equipment for pre-deployment training and have always provided in-theatre training where that has not been possible.

Mr. Evennett: I note the Minister's comments, but is he not concerned that the number of cancelled military training exercises has increased since 2005 from 58 in 2005-06 to 80 in 2008-09? Is that not unacceptable, and what more can the Government do to ensure that the training is given before the equipment is used?

Mr. Ainsworth: Current operations will always have to be the priority. Given the operations in which people are involved, the structure of our training has changed significantly over the past couple of years. Of course, pre-deployment training takes priority, which sometimes has an impact on other training opportunities. We have to do our best to ensure that we maintain all the skills that are necessary for both other contingent liabilities and the operations in which we are involved in places such as Afghanistan.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What steps are being taken to ensure that those personnel returning from theatre can pass on their up-to-date and latest experience of equipment and counter-insurgency to those who are having pre-deployment training so that the latest information and experiences are passed on to troops before they go into theatre?

Mr. Ainsworth: My hon. Friend hits on an important point, of which all the services are fully seized: people who are about to be deployed into a changing situation, with changing threats, need to be brought up to date as completely as possible by those with the latest information. We, and the Army, Navy and Air Force, try to ensure that training is structured in such a way that all those lessons are learned to the maximum possible degree.

Sir Peter Viggers (Gosport) (Con): When short-term gaps in equipment emerge, they are met by urgent operational requirements—UORs—which can mean that although equipment is put in place, which is welcome, troops do not have the proper training on working with that equipment. Would not a better long-term plan be a strategic review to assess more accurately equipment needs against operational requirements?

Mr. Ainsworth: In an ideal world, we would have a proper full-blown procurement system that would be able, for example, to bring vehicles such as Mastiff into use within the 19-week time that elapsed from its first planning to deployment in theatre. However, that will never be possible. When the nature of threat changes—

in Afghanistan, the situation has changed from overwhelmingly a shooting war to one in which the improvised explosive device, or the roadside bomb, became our enemies' tactic of choice—we have to get new equipment into theatre quickly. Of course, we must follow that through with capability so that training on the equipment can take place as quickly as possible thereafter. When lives are at risk, it is essential that theatre needs come first. However, we have improved the way in which we are getting theatre-level equipment into the training establishment, because it is no good deploying equipment if we are not deploying capability, which means people capable of using the equipment with which we have provided them.

Topical Questions

T2. [277559] **John Barrett** (Edinburgh, West) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Hutton): My departmental responsibilities are to ensure that our country is properly defended now and in the future, and that our service personnel have the right equipment and training to allow them to succeed in the military tasks in which they are engaged, either at home or abroad.

John Barrett: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. At a time when many former servicemen and women can find it difficult to settle back into civilian life, and at a time of rising unemployment, what is he doing to ensure that the training that they are given when they are in the forces is transferable to civilian life?

Mr. Hutton: We work very hard, and put in significant effort, to ensure that those who leave the forces get the best opportunity to take up a career in civilian life. We have made new commitments on helping ex-servicemen and women migrate from the military family into the civilian world, and we will continue to do everything that we can to ensure that that happens.

T10. [277567] **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley) (Lab): May I take my right hon. Friend back to the EU and NATO meeting that he is holding? Will he explain to those at the meeting that the inappropriate weight being placed on UK armed forces, and the fact that those NATO colleagues are not committing personnel or equipment, are unacceptable? We need such personnel and equipment in Helmand province. We should be taking the weight off our personnel and giving our UK armed forces the much needed break that they require.

Mr. Hutton: That is certainly part of our argument. The draw-down from Operation Telic will help to ease the operational stress under which the armed forces have recently been operating. Specifically on Afghanistan, more contributions from more nations would be welcome—I think that there will be more in future months—but the ability to deploy forces without caveats would also be welcome, because those caveats often impede flexibility and the delivery of maximum effect on the ground.

T3. [277560] **Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory** (Wells) (Con): In earlier exchanges about the application of human rights law to the armed forces, the Secretary of State said that international law was fixed and that domestic legislation simply implemented it. However, is he aware that the French Government, with more foresight than us, derogated from articles 5 and 6 of the European convention on human rights precisely because they were afraid of the way in which the terms of those articles would affect their troops on the battlefield? Why did not the British Government show similar foresight by doing that when they passed the Human Rights Act 1998 at the start of their time in government?

Mr. Hutton: The particular case that came before the Court of Appeal, and that was the subject of our earlier exchanges, was not just about the articles that the right hon. Gentleman mentions; it covered article 2 as well, as he will be aware. I was asked to speculate on what we would do if we lost the appeal, and I probably went further than I should have done in speculating on what our response would be. The only way in which I can sensibly answer his question is simply to repeat one fundamental point: we will have to consider the Court of Appeal ruling very carefully indeed. If there were to be an appeal, and that appeal were unsuccessful, the Government would have an obligation to reassess the situation in the round.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): The deaths of civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan have already been raised in questions today, and have certainly caused a lot of concern, not least among the Pakistani community in this country. I am sure that the Government and the allies are doing their best to ensure that civilian casualties are minimised, but will my right hon. Friend ensure that the UK and the other NATO forces look at their tactics and their approach, to try to ensure that there are no civilian casualties? When there are such casualties, not only are there terrible consequences for the families involved, but it jeopardises the credibility and standing of the NATO forces in the area.

Mr. Hutton: The whole point of the military deployment in Afghanistan, and the whole point of the British military deployment in particular, is to protect the population from the threat of indiscriminate violence from the insurgency. We take that responsibility very seriously. A significant effort goes into identifying a target, and making sure that there are no civilian casualties. We make every conceivable effort to avoid civilian casualties. The difficulty that our commanders face on the ground is often compounded by the fact that the Taliban show no such respect for human life, and will often launch their attacks against our forces—our young men and women—from behind children, older people and women. That is the reality that our commanders face on the ground, and I can say absolutely confidently that we move heaven and earth to avoid harming members of the local population. That will continue to be our policy.

T4. [277561] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that about two thirds of opium production continues to come from Helmand province, despite the presence of British troops there. From that province, there emanates a large supply of heroin, which is then supplied on the streets of Britain. What action are British troops taking to combat that

increasing problem? Will the Secretary of State assure the House that the matter will be taken very seriously because of the effect that it has on young people in our country today?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. The British armed forces are heavily involved in trying to intercept the flow of money and materials that have their origins in the drugs trade, and that feed and fuel the insurgency. We have undertaken a number of very successful operations—I am happy to provide him with details—in which our forces have made important confiscations and have seized significant drug assets. We also support the local law and order operations of the Afghan security forces. We are making progress, and the governor in Helmand province is making real progress in reducing the total acreage devoted to opium production. We are supporting those efforts, and we need to redouble them if they are to have the effect that the hon. Gentleman and I both want.

Hugh Bayley (City of York) (Lab): The recession means that the Governments of all NATO member states will be scrutinising their public expenditure ever more closely, with the consequence that some, I am sure, will propose cutting defence expenditure. What impact will that have on burden sharing, and what representations is my right hon. Friend making on the North Atlantic Council to make sure that front-line services are protected?

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend is right that there is a danger that precisely what he says will happen. Our view is that we should prioritise current operations, and we want our allies to prioritise them, too, particularly their respective deployments to Afghanistan. I am glad to say that many more NATO members are deploying more resources to Afghanistan, despite the current economic difficulties, and despite the undoubted pressure on their national budgets.

T5. [277562] **Mr. David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Given the number of veterans who are in prison or on the streets, what discussions is the Minister having with his NHS counterparts about discovering cases of combat stress in the veteran community before serious symptoms emerge?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Kevan Jones): The Government produced the command paper last year which includes a host of initiatives to support servicemen and women in service as well as veterans. I have commissioned a piece of work called the welfare pathway which I will announce later this year. Among other things, it looks at work with charities and with other Government Departments. We also support the King's Centre for Military Health Research in assessing the instance of mental illness not only in servicemen and women, but in veterans. We are conducting a study with the Ministry of Justice to ascertain the number of veterans in prison. The Government are committed to ensuring that the fullest support is given not only to our servicemen and women in service, but to veterans.

T6. [277563] **Bob Spink** (Castle Point) (Ind): Marching in the Castle Point armed forces day celebrations on 27 June this year will be the Gurkhas, the Chelsea pensioners, the Royal Anglian regiment, many local veterans and young people in cadets organisations. They will be showing the role that those people have played in society over the years and the part that they can still play in our community. What message does the Minister have for them?

Mr. Kevan Jones: May I start by thanking the hon. Gentleman for his encouragement and involvement in the celebrations in his constituency, which as he said will involve the march-past and support of armed forces day? More than 80 communities throughout the UK are being supported directly by the MOD. In many others, smaller events are taking place. So far, 460 out of 480 councils have agreed to be involved in the raising of the armed forces day flag. May I encourage communities large and small to ensure that they take part in armed forces day on 27 June or in the lead-up to it, to say a big thank you to our servicemen and women and to acknowledge the debt of honour that we owe to veterans?

T7. [277564] **Mr. Mark Lancaster** (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): Ascension Island remains a key strategic asset for the United Kingdom, but its financial future is under threat as a result of the MOD refusing to pay its fair share of costs for running the island. Is it right, for example, that next year the administrator of the island may have to close the island's school because of an internal dispute between Government Departments? Will the Secretary of State look into the matter urgently and write to me outlining the steps that he intends to take to resolve this serious situation?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): I know that the hon. Gentleman has written to the Department about the matter and that he has had a holding answer. We are looking into the issue and we will, of course, reply to him. There is a dispute, and we will write to him as soon as we are able about exactly what we can and cannot do with regard to that situation.

T8. [277565] **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister with responsibility for defence equipment, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), recently said in a speech that

"claims of a multi-billion pound funding gap paralysing defence procurement were wrong".

However, since then we have heard that a number of the Nimrod MRA4 surveillance aircraft will be cancelled, the Soothsayer communications programme will be axed, and Project Eagle will be cancelled, as will the RAF Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle. That will surely expose some of our front-line troops on the ground, so how can we take seriously or believe what the hon. Gentleman says?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Quentin Davies): I am beginning to wonder how we can take seriously the questions asked by the hon. Gentleman. What he referred to as absolute fact is complete nonsense. The MRA4 contract has not been cancelled and is not going to be cancelled. We are expecting to take delivery of those aircraft starting from the end of the year. The Reaper contract has not been cancelled either.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I welcome the announcement this week that the MOD is to review the role of women in the armed forces. If we are to discharge our duties under UN Security Council resolution 1325, which specifically looks at the role of girls and women in armed conflict and the consequences of what happens to them, it is vital that we increase women's participation in our armed forces. Experiences in Kosovo and central Africa show that where women are the victims of sexual violence in post-conflict situations, they will not reveal this to male soldiers.

Mr. Hutton: We are trying to improve the recruitment of women to the armed forces, and we have been successful to some extent. The review to which my hon. Friend referred is a more specific review of the role of women in combat roles in the military. I do not want to say much more about that today, but we will keep the House fully informed of that review's progress.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton) (Con): My son is one of the officers fighting alongside brave men in Afghanistan at the moment. One issue that all our soldiers face concerns the porous border with Pakistan. What is the Ministry of Defence doing to assist the Government of Pakistan and their army to try to establish further control through what seem, so far, to be successful activities in the Swat valley?

Mr. Hutton: First, may I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's son? We respect and salute his service in the name of our country. On Pakistan, the hon. Gentleman has again identified an important point. We are providing a range of help and support to Pakistan's security forces, particularly the frontier corps, helping them improve their capabilities and their ability to deal with the serious threat to Pakistan's nascent democracy posed by the Taliban and similar extremists. We are involved in a training role with the Pakistani military, too, and we will continue to extend the hand of friendship to the Pakistani armed forces in their fundamental struggle against the forces of darkness and primitivism.

T9. [277566] **Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State is concerned as anybody about developments in North Korea, but does he agree that the problem is not just the capacity of the North Koreans, but the possibility that they may seek to export both nuclear and missile technology to third-party states? Apart from obvious conversations with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, will he take up the matter at NATO level and report back to the House with his plans?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I should be happy to do that.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Prime Minister quite rightly said that he wants to enhance the role of the House and make it central to our politics. This morning, however, he has been making statements in the media about various initiatives that he wants to take, including the establishment of the national council for democratic renewal. Given that the Prime Minister has found time today to speak to a TV talent show contestant, will he find the time to come to this House to make a statement on the far-reaching proposals that he intends to bring forward?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for me.

Mr. Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On a similar matter, in the *Financial Times* last Friday, there appeared to be a set of detailed announcements about the award of Government contracts under the flexible new deal. Have you had any information from a Minister indicating an intention to tell the House, either in person or by way of a written statement, about the award of contracts totalling billions of pounds? Or are we yet again to see announcements in newspapers before Members are informed?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for me, but the hon. Gentleman can table parliamentary questions and ask questions in the House.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): On a point of order. Mr. Speaker. I have in my constituency about 1,000 veterans and people who are interested in the armed forces. The House authorities inform me that I can send information to them about the Castle Point armed forces day events

"using stamps and envelopes purchased from the Communications Expenditure".

They also say:

"Pre paid envelopes should not be used."

That restriction seems ridiculous. It imposes extra work and costs on my office and staff and makes no sense at all to my constituents. Will you ask someone to review those rules and bring them up to date?

Mr. Speaker: In the past few days, there have been serious complaints about how we use the resources before us, and the reason for the restrictions on envelopes and the introduction of the communications allowance was that some hon. Members were using massive amounts of envelopes, and it had to be stopped. I know that it may be an intrusion or a difficulty for the staff, but the fact of the matter is that there are resources in the hon. Gentleman's office to use those facilities.

Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill [*Lords*]

[Relevant Document: The Fourth Report from the Business and Enterprise Committee, HC 89, on Regional development agencies and the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill.]

Second Reading

3.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Hazel Blears): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Every one of us understands the degree of public anger at politics and politicians and the pressing need to reform our democracy, but it is vital that that anger be channelled into practical reforms that reconnect people with their political system and allow citizens to exercise more influence and more control. The Bill is practical and focused, and it takes us a few steps further forward on our journey.

First, it continues the drive towards stronger local democracy, empowering both local authorities and individuals by implementing the principles set out in the White Paper "Communities in control". Secondly, it promotes economic recovery and encourages future growth and development by implementing the proposals set out in the review of sub-national economic development and regeneration. A healthy and vibrant democracy is the foundation of a secure and prosperous society. In the past decade, local authorities have taken on an increasingly important role in driving change and improving the lives of local people: we have given them increased freedom and flexibility so that they can make the most of their local strength and knowledge and connect with local people.

It has become clear, particularly in the past few weeks, that many people feel cut off or inhibited from taking part in the democratic process. It is vital that we try to overcome those barriers and to create the thriving, healthy and vibrant local democracy that would give people every possible opportunity to speak up and get involved in their local services. Side by side with the Second Reading of the Bill, we have today published a review of the evidence base, which looks at the various ways we can try to empower people—whether that involves the transfer of assets, participatory budgeting or the right to use petitions. The review reinforces exactly what we are trying to achieve through the Bill.

The Bill introduces new measures to strengthen local democracy further by, first, giving councils new duties actively to promote democratic engagement and civic participation and, secondly, giving local people stronger rights and more opportunities to have their say, through increased and enhanced scrutiny and—for the first time—through legal rights to get a response to their petitions.

In these tough economic times, those goals are more important than ever. The goals make everyone feel they can take practical action that will have a direct impact for them, their families and their neighbourhoods. The goals will also help people to shape more effective and responsive public services. That is even more important at the present time.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): We all understand the desire and need to promote greater involvement, but I am puzzled by the concept of the duty. It implies that something will happen if an authority does not live up to it. What exactly would happen to an authority that was seen to be in breach of its duty? How would such a duty be determined? Would it not be better not to have that concept of duty but to keep the promotion of greater involvement, with which the right hon. Lady would find the House in full agreement?

Hazel Blears: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Getting the balance right between powers and duties always exercises us in local government. It is important that there should be a duty because, unfortunately, although many local authorities are doing excellent work on that agenda, not all of them are. We want to try to bring everyone up to the standard of the best. Embedding the issue in the local performance framework, so that that the comprehensive area assessment will measure and assess how well local authorities are promoting democracy in their areas, will be important in ensuring that the issue becomes part of the normal core business of local authorities, rather than the icing on the cake. How far we go with duties as opposed to powers is always a matter of judgment. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue, because democracy is fundamental.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend understand that one of the mistakes we made on this side was to prevent many local authorities from maintaining a committee system? That system was healthy for democracy; it was a form of power sharing that involved all councils of all political parties. When we come to the appropriate stage, will my right hon. Friend accept an amendment that would permit local authorities to have a committee system once more? That system endured and was successful for more than 110 years.

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend will table amendments at the appropriate time. I do not accept that simply having a committee system will ensure better local democracy. I have seen many committee systems in which people's service on committees has prevented them from being out and about in the community as front-line champions and local representatives. */Interruption./* It is clear that my hon. Friend does not agree with me on the issue, and he is perfectly entitled to his view.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I am looking at clauses 3 and 4. Could the Secretary of State explain what business it is of a local authority to "promote" matters to do with the criminal justice system? In clause 3, for example, she requires local authorities to promote independent monitoring boards to do with prisons, courts boards and youth offending teams. Clause 4 states:

"A principal local authority has a duty to promote understanding among local people of…the functions of a lay justice".

Surely the separation of powers that her Government seem so keen on would contradict what she has put into these provisions.

Hazel Blears: I am surprised that the hon. and learned Gentleman does not recognise that the implications of the criminal justice system have a real impact on local communities. These bodies are not separate entities. To follow through his point, he is saying that the local authority should have nothing to do with the police system or the health system. People live in communities, and all these bodies have an impact on their quality of life. It is very important that local authorities should seek to help to recruit people to become magistrates and school governors—to take on all those civic roles in life. If he feels that these things are entirely separate, independent and not interrelated, he is not living in the kind of community that most of us live in.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): With regard to a duty, will my right hon. Friend say explicitly that there is a role for parish and town councils? I declare an interest as a continuing town councillor of some 23 years. They are the first level of government, not the lowest level, and they have a key role to play in all manner of different areas. It is important that principal authorities consult them, use them as a layer of democracy, and do not try to shut them out. I hope there will be a provision in the Bill to make that formally the case.

Hazel Blears: I can reassure my hon. Friend that I am absolutely committed to ensuring that parish councils, town councils and all these local organisations play a full role in our democracy. I have had several meetings with the National Association of Local Councils; its members are an extremely constructive group of people, and I am keen to involve them at every single level during the passage of this legislation.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): Could my right hon. Friend give the House some indication of whether her broad welcome for parish councils could apply in the urban setting?

Hazel Blears: I am more than happy to give my hon. Friend that undertaking. Increasing numbers of town councils, parish councils and neighbourhood councils are being established in urban areas. As we have moved towards the new unitary authorities, which are quite large organisations, it has become very important to get them underpinned by local democratic bodies. I do not see parish councils as simply a matter for rural areas: wherever people live, they should have the right to have local representation in their community and neighbourhood.

Following up the points made by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), the Bill is just one element of a wider Government drive to try to ensure that local people have every opportunity to get involved in local decision making, not merely within their local authorities.

Mr. Garnier: We are in danger of having a fairly sterile argument, because the Secretary of State clearly does not understand the point that I made to her. If she thinks that it should be the duty of a local authority

"to promote understanding among local people of…the functions of a lay justice",

why should it not promote understanding among local people of the functions of the Church of England or, in her particular area, the Methodist Church? Why does

she draw a distinction between what is a proper function of a local authority and all the things that she refers to in the Bill?

Hazel Blears: People who commit offences or get involved with the criminal justice system live in places and communities, they interact with families, and they have an impact on neighbourhoods. That is why it is important to try, for example, to encourage people to get involved in youth referral panels, and it is entirely proper for the local authority to encourage that to happen. Far from my not understanding the hon. and learned Gentleman's point, I would say he does not understand how modern communities work in this day and age the length and breadth of this country.

The progress that we have made in implementing the proposals in "Communities in control" has just been set out in our progress report, which, together with the evidence base, is published to coincide with Second Reading. I have been heartened by the fact that the evaluation of the proposals that we have made so far indicates that we are beginning to make some progress in making people feel more able to influence things that happen in their neighbourhoods.

The second theme of our Bill is economic development, both promoting recovery in the short term—real help now for communities—and, crucially, promoting growth and prosperity in the longer term. Over the past year we have been working with local government, regional development agencies and local community groups to try to determine the best arrangements for driving economic growth in future and to identify how the relevant powers and responsibilities should be distributed among the local, regional and national levels. The results of our consultations have been largely welcomed and endorsed, and the Bill will now put the arrangements in place.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Alongside the imperative to improve economic performance, should we not give equal weight to social and environmental concerns? Should there not therefore be a much bolder, stronger duty in the Bill relating to sustainable development as a whole, rather than a big assessment of economics and little reference to sustainable development in regional planning?

Hazel Blears: I hope to be able to reassure my hon. Friend, because I know that he is a champion of this issue. The whole purpose of the single integrated regional strategy is to balance economic growth with the environment and social justice. Those are the three pivotal issues that we need to get right in our integrated planning. Something that has not been as well managed as it might have been is the fact that spatial planning has gone in one direction and economic planning has gone in another. Using the same evidence base for both in drawing up the single regional strategy will be a significant improvement. I give him the undertaking that sustainable development is at the heart of the Bill.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): That being the case, would it not be far more appropriate for the regional development agencies to be overseen by the Department for Communities and Local Government rather than the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform?

Hazel Blears: With great respect, I shall make a similar point to the hon. Lady to the one I made to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier). Increasingly, the way in which services are organised will require more integration at both Whitehall and local level. The mere fact that the RDAs sit in another Government Department should not militate against joint work, integrated services and balancing economic and environmental sustainability. The days when the Department that bodies were in determined the framework within which they operated, to the exclusion of such broader thematic considerations, are long gone—or they ought to be gone, very quickly indeed.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that the RDAs are accountable to the communities they serve, and that that is much more important than the Department to which they are responsible?

Hazel Blears: It is important that all our organisations are accountable, and when I come to the single regional strategy, I hope that my hon. Friend will be reassured that the RDAs, working with the leaders' boards and signing off plans jointly, will give us some of that accountability. I would also make the point that in the current recession, the RDAs have played a significant role by acting quickly, nimbly and flexibly to promote jobs, and particularly to help small businesses during this tough economic time. That is an important part of their role.

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am intrigued by the fact that, although my right hon. Friend rightly says we ought to encourage greater participation and local democracy, we are now talking about the RDAs. In the case of the Liverpool city region, the RDA is channelling all the European structural funding to the Mersey Partnership, which started off as an unelected, glorified tourism operation and is accountable to nobody. How can we get practical politics with accountability when we are using quangos of one sort or another, at not just regional but local level, to dispose of the funding in a given area?

Hazel Blears: I hope my hon. Friend will see that the proposals in the Bill are designed to address the issue that he raises. The single regional strategy will be a joint document prepared by the local authorities and the RDA, and it will need to be signed off by the leaders' board. In many cases the local authority will be the delivery agent for implementing that strategy, and the RDA funds will therefore be channelled through the local authorities to deliver the priorities that local people say are important to them. I hope that at the end of the debate he will be convinced that those are steps in the direction in which he wishes us to travel.

Joan Walley: Further to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), will the Secretary of State give some indication of whether the Campaign to Protect Rural England could be consulted on sustainable economic development, so that we have safeguards for protecting and enhancing biodiversity and landscape? Will there be scope for the Bill to include something more specific on that?

Hazel Blears: I appreciate that my hon. Friend is an advocate of environmental issues, especially biodiversity. I reassure her that we intend to draw on the knowledge, expertise and experience of organisations such as the CPRE when forming our strategies. I have no doubt that, when the Bill proceeds through Committee, questions will be asked about the next stage, the guidance that we issue and the consultees we draw into our process. We want to ensure that the environment is at the heart of our proposals.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Secretary of State a little harder on community involvement in the regional strategy? She gave my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) reassuring answers about community involvement. Indeed, clause 72 provides that a statement on community involvement should be prepared and published. However, can it be right to leave the decision about who should be consulted to the RDAs and the local authority leaders' boards? How can we ensure that those who have economic, social or environmental stakeholding responsibilities are genuinely and actively involved with the communities in which they are rooted? That is a significant concern that people in North-West Leicestershire have about the Bill. They are worried that community involvement is not spelled out, but left to the discretion of unelected bodies, which will perhaps fulfil the responsibility in a rather token way.

Hazel Blears: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns and those of other hon. Members to ensure that we maximise community involvement. Hon. Members know that that cause is close to my heart and that I have campaigned on it for many years. I am trying to ensure in the Bill that the elected authorities, which are members of the leaders' boards, take responsibility for that. *[Interruption.]* They are elected by people in the community.

I take the point that the social, economic and environmental partners need to be fully involved, but we have not prescribed that in the Bill because that needs to be flexible. The clause that my hon. Friend highlighted provides for community involvement on a statutory basis. That is a huge step forward; in the past, it was simply taken for granted. If my hon. Friend wants to make that involvement even firmer, I am sure that there will be opportunities to do that during the Bill's passage through the House. However, I give him an undertaking—I have given many undertakings today—that community involvement should be at the heart of the strategy. If it is not, the issues that people feel are a priority for them will not be addressed.

Mr. Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am interested in the Secretary of State's comments about taking cognisance of the desire for RDAs in particular to reflect community interests more. How would she effect that desire when Advantage West Midlands, the RDA in my area, is on the point of cutting substantial funding to each local authority in its area without proper consultation?

Hazel Blears: The hon. Gentleman knows that RDAs throughout the country, including in the west midlands, have played a significant role during the economic downturn in doing the opposite of what he claims. They have provided support, particularly for small businesses, through advice, information and deferring tax for more than 100,000 business organisations. They have also played a significant role in bringing inward investment to our regions. Of course, the community needs to be involved in drawing up single strategies, but we should not underestimate the role of the RDAs in providing real help to people and communities now. I know it is the Conservative party's policy to abolish the RDAs, but I think that would be unpopular with businesses that are trying to provide employment opportunities for people in their areas.

The first clauses introduce a new duty for councils to promote democracy. Many hon. Members have asked me what that means practically. It is a novel duty, which has not been considered previously, but the Bill sets out in some detail what it means. Councils must explain their functions: what they do and how they reach decisions; and how other bodies, such as the police, the health service and the criminal justice system, make decisions. Ordinary people have a legitimate interest in knowing how those organisations, which have a significant influence over their lives, conduct their business, and how they can get involved, influence their decisions and make them more accountable and responsive to them and their community.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in promoting democracy in our areas, it would be useful if local authorities such as Bradford got back to the idea of canvassing to get people on the electoral register, which is a basic ingredient of democracy?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Obviously we have important elections later this week, but if people are not registered to vote in the first place, trying to get them out to vote is very difficult indeed. However, she will know that the Secretary of State for Justice and I are trying to put extra funds into electoral registration and provide a more rigorous performance framework for electoral registration, which will, we hope, maximise an accurate and comprehensive register. It is essential that people are registered to exercise their democratic rights.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Now that we have a Youth Parliament, would it not be a good idea to encourage all councils, not just one or two, to have youth councils shadowing the work of the senior council and meeting in the council chambers?

Hazel Blears: That is an excellent idea. I am delighted that we managed, after three or four debates in the House, to establish the principle that the Youth Parliament should be able to sit and hold a debate in this Chamber, despite opposition from some Opposition Members. I am also delighted to tell my hon. Friend that we recently launched a programme to establish at least another 20 youth mayors, with budgets, across the country. We will also launch a programme shortly to allow young people to shadow Ministers and councillors in their areas and give them an understanding of what exactly their work entails.

Andrew Mackinlay: And reducing the voting age?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend will know that the Youth Citizenship Commission is looking at exactly those issues and will come forward with recommendations in due course.

The new duty to promote democracy means that councils must explain their functions and decision-making processes. The Bill also introduces a duty for local authorities to respond to petitions, which is a fairly straightforward way of trying to ensure that issues that people are concerned about locally are discussed. The review of evidence, which I talked about earlier, also confirms that when petitions are taken seriously and people feel that they will be acted on, they will have a significant influence in getting more people involved.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State not understand that the real problem with councils explaining themselves is the sheer complexity of the environment in which they already operate? It is difficult for those of us who interact daily with councils to understand, but the Bill will make the situation more complicated and more difficult to explain, and therefore less democratic.

Hazel Blears: If someone has a problem with litter and graffiti on their street, the Bill requires the council to respond to their petition. I do not see how that makes the situation any more complex; in fact, I think it makes getting something done about the problem much more simple and straightforward.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): I agree with the Secretary of State that petitions and large-scale participation by the public are welcome. She must therefore welcome the more than 28,000 submissions to the east of England regional strategy, of which nearly 27,000 turned out to be objections, and the 35,000 submissions to the strategy for the south-west, of which I would guess more than 30,000 will turn out to be objections. Is she satisfied that enough changes will be made, as far as she is able to make them, as a result of those thousands of objections, and that the Bill reflects a move towards more accountability by regional bodies, not less?

Hazel Blears: The hon. Gentleman has been an effective advocate in relation to some of the spatial strategies. He will know that we have looked very carefully indeed at the representations and that significant changes have been made as a result. I hope he will give us credit for that. It is important that people take part and feel that some things do change. It is my experience that people do not expect everything to change as a result of their representations, but they want to see that they have made a difference. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that is exactly the procedure adopted in the spatial strategies.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hazel Blears: I am going to make a little progress; otherwise I will take up everybody else's time.

The best councils already take account of petitions—I think that about a third of councils have a formal scheme in place for doing that—and we now expect all authorities to follow suit. If enough people sign a petition, this will trigger a debate, guaranteeing that elected representatives discuss the issues that are of concern at local level. Amendments in the other place have made the petitions scheme much less prescriptive than was originally proposed, which will help authorities to set the parameters around the petitions duty.

The Bill also extends the existing duty on local authorities to involve local people to a whole range of other organisations, including Jobcentre Plus, police authorities, the Environment Agency, probation trusts and other providers of services. They, too, will have to involve local people. Eventually, we shall have an integrated system in which involving people is done as a matter of course, rather than being somehow out of the ordinary.

Julia Goldsworthy: Will that duty to participate also extend to partnership organisations, such as local strategic partnerships in which a number of organisations make decisions about public resources, as well as the statutory authorities that the Secretary of State has already mentioned? Such organisations often do not meet in public.

Hazel Blears: All the partnership organisations should certainly be under a responsibility to involve local people. Those organisations are spending public money and our intention is to move towards a system in which community engagement with decision making on the totality of public expenditure by local authorities, the health service and the police is fundamental to ensuring that the best possible decisions are taken.

The Bill goes on to enable the Secretary of State to fund the National Tenant Voice, which will be a powerful advocate on behalf of tenants. I think that there are about 4 million people in social housing, and they need a strong voice. This measure will ensure that they are heard at the highest level, and that they will be involved in shaping the policy that affects them. It will complement the work of the new Tenant Services Authority.

I should like to mention an excellent example from my own neighbourhood. An arm's length management organisation called Salix Homes has a scrutiny panel of about 30 local tenants, known as senators. I think that this has been the first scrutiny work of this kind in the country. The panel makes recommendations and its views are fed into the housing association, which makes changes on the basis of what its tenants have said is important. That scrutiny is driving continual improvement and excellent services, and it is really making a difference.

Clauses 30 and 31 will strengthen overview and scrutiny arrangements in local authorities, making them clearer, easier to understand and more effective and, I hope, making it easier for residents to get involved. I am always conscious of complexity, but if we can make the scrutiny arrangements simpler, people will feel that it is worth while their getting involved and making a difference.

Councils with responsibilities for local area agreements will have a duty to designate an officer with specific responsibility for scrutiny—many places already do this, but, unfortunately, not everywhere does—so that there is a person who is responsible for ensuring that there is a better way for the public to get involved. Local authorities will also be able to set up joint overview and scrutiny committees. For example, a range of district councils could come together to be more effective. Those committees will have a greater remit, and will be able to review issues affecting a whole range of residents.

The first half of the Bill finishes with clauses to establish a new, impartial and independent local government boundary commission for England. This was recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life to enable the Electoral Commission to concentrate on its core

[Hazel Blears]

duty of electoral registration, rather than having to deal with boundary issues. I hope that that provision will be welcome.

Let me turn now to the second half of the Bill, with its emphasis on promoting economic recovery and growth. We all know that national prosperity depends very much on what happens at local and regional level. In the new economy, an ability to have clear vision and leadership in our regions and at sub-regional level will be fundamental to success. It is essential that local and regional leaders put in place the right strategies, and that they have the right powers, frameworks and investment to drive opportunities in the new economy.

Our review of sub-national economic development and regeneration recognised the importance of local authorities in a significantly different way from what had been the case in the past. That is particularly important in tough economic times, so we need to ensure that the framework and the powers are rightly held at each level of government—local, regional and national.

The Bill places a duty on local authorities to assess the economic conditions in their area, looking at factors such as employment, jobs, skills, enterprise, the number of start-up businesses in particular areas and so forth. If they have such information through the assessment, they will be much better able to provide the economic leadership that will stimulate and promote growth. Many councils have a really good understanding of their local economy; not all do, however, and we want to bring them all up to the level of the best.

The next clauses introduce the single and integrated regional strategy that I have talked about for each English region outside London. It involves a much more co-ordinated approach, bringing together issues such as housing, transport, skills and planning that go across local authority areas. If we are to provide the right framework, particularly for inward investment, our pitch to the people who we want to invest has to say that there are good offers around planning and transport that are fundamental to driving economic regeneration.

Martin Horwood: The less integrated approach that we have had to date has taken about five years to move from initial consultations through to draft proposals on changes to the regional strategy in the south-west—and it is still not complete. How long, then, does the Secretary of State think the more integrated version will take?

Hazel Blears: It will be an awful lot faster than the previous process, and I say that to the hon. Gentleman for this reason. In the past, we had spatial strategies that often used a different evidence base from the economic strategies, which meant that there were inherent tensions in the system that pulled against each other rather than pushing us towards a much more integrated approach. The fact that the strategy will need to be signed off by the leaders' board and the regional development agency provides an incentive for them to ensure that everything comes through quickly, while at the same time taking into account the environmental and community issues that my hon. Friends have raised. We will have integrated strategies that will help to drive forward economic development as well.

Mr. Drew: Will my right hon. Friend include an explicit definition of sustainable development in the Bill? Many definitions are floating around in different legislative measures, but surely this is the Bill in which to lay to rest any uncertainty about the need for all development to be sustainable. Does she agree that we should put that at the heart of the Bill?

Hazel Blears: If development is not sustainable, it will not be the kind of development that will drive economic prosperity or quality of life, which are absolutely at the heart of this Bill. Whether it be housing development, jobs or industry, sustainability has to be built into it from the beginning; that is one of the lessons we have learned in reflecting on the different strategies we developed previously. As I said, they clashed with each other, whereas we are now developing an integrated approach, which I know my hon. Friend feels so strongly about.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): When someone embarks on a strategy, how do they know whether it is going to be sustainable?

Hazel Blears: We could probably embark on an interesting philosophical discussion and I am always keen to explore these issues with the right hon. Gentleman, who has a great deal of experience in this area. There are principles of sustainability that apply to the environment, climate change and creating the kind of community that is not just about building houses, but the schools, transport, shops and facilities that go with them. These principles of sustainable development are now, I think, fairly well established, which means that we should not be creating the kind of communities that we unfortunately saw in the 1960s and 1970s, which were not good places for people to live, work or bring up their families in. The whole point of these strategies is to create sustainable places in which people want to live, work and bring up their families. It is not such an arcane discussion as we might have had a few years ago, because those principles are, as I say, pretty well established now.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Secretary of State is being very patient with us. I have nothing against regional strategies; indeed, quite the reverse, having seen what the other lot did for many years. Having a partnership to decide the regional strategy is one thing, but is it not the case that the regional development agency effectively holds a gun to the elected members' heads simply by virtue of the fact that it controls the funding? The RDA certainly has the upper hand in determining the important outcomes from the strategy.

Hazel Blears: I would say that the position is almost exactly the reverse. Although the regional development agency has the RDA funds, local authorities also hold a huge amount of resource in the form of their normal funding, the working neighbourhoods fund or the future jobs fund, which I announced last week along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. It gives local authorities £1 billion with which to create 150,000 jobs over the next two years. Make no mistake: local authorities are not in the weak, supplicant position of simply having to go along with what the RDA says. This has to be a genuine equal partnership, and local authorities are increasingly becoming powerful economic players for their own regions and communities.

Given the economic assessment, the single strategy and the work of the local authority leaders' boards and RDAs in driving it forward, I believe that something very interesting is emerging. This is not just about economic development at regional level; it is more and more about what happens at sub-regional level when local authorities form groups in order to drive change. Many authorities of all political persuasions are now choosing to enter into multi-area agreements, because they see the importance of collaboration between them on this economic agenda. Ten agreements involving 78 local authorities across the country and covering a quarter of the population have been signed from South Hampshire to South Yorkshire and everywhere in between.

Martin Horwood: Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury are collaborating on a joint core strategy that will implement the regional spatial strategy that we expect to be finalised this year. Should they now stop that process and wait for the new integrated regional strategy? Will they not otherwise be developing the implementation of something that is already out of date?

Hazel Blears: I see no reason for those authorities simply to call a halt to their discussions and plans. It is not beyond the wit of people to adapt to the new statutory framework once it is in place. It would not be sensible for them to throw away all the work that they have already done, much of which can be drawn into the new single integrated strategy. That is a matter for negotiation between the leaders' boards and the RDAs in their areas. I do not want people suddenly to decide, on an arbitrary date, that all their work has been pointless and that they will not do it any more. A great deal of it will have involved gathering evidence and coming up with policies that will be just as relevant in the future as they were in the past.

Peter Luff: Will the Secretary of State give way again?

Hazel Blears: In a moment. I want to finish what I was saying about the multi-area agreements. The fact that 10 have been signed, involving 78 local authorities, a quarter of the population and a number of different parties, suggests that people are seeing significant benefit in greater collaboration between local authorities, and I want to encourage them to do more of that. Many have told us that they want to put MAAs on to a statutory footing so that the authorities have more legal power to make a difference. The Bill makes it possible to set up MAAs on a statutory basis similar to that of the local area agreements, which are now beginning to integrate health, council, police and other services.

I hope Members agree that this is a coherent piece of architecture. Where statutory processes are operating, the centre will exercise less power and devolve more power to the people in local authorities who we all want to be able to make decisions.

Julia Goldsworthy: The Secretary of State has just described this as a much more coherent arrangement. I am sure that it is from the point of view of those sitting in Whitehall, but how coherent does she think it appears to those who are at the receiving end of public services in local communities? How effective does she think they consider these multi-area agreements to be?

Hazel Blears: That is a fair question. So far the architecture has been designed to achieve system change, and it will not necessarily have an impact on people with specific requirements—for instance, those who want to know how to obtain funding for their local nursery or community allotment. The challenge for all of us, as politicians, is not just to bring about system change—although we must do that: we must make the system work—but to translate that into giving people opportunities to do what they want to do in order to make their communities better places in which to live. The community generally does not need to know the details of the MMA, the LLA and the comprehensive area assessment. That is for us to deal with. The challenge—and I take it as a personal challenge—is how the system can be made simpler and easier for people to handle from the inside. That is why there is a duty to promote democracy and to explain who makes the decisions, where people can have an input and how they can make a difference.

Peter Luff: On a point of detail about the sub-regional consideration of development issues in particular, recommendation 26 of the Business and Enterprise Committee's fourth report of Session 2008-09 stated:

> "The Committee is concerned about the process by which local authorities…can leave EPBs."

If there is no easier mechanism to withdraw, a disruptive member of an economic prosperity board could cause real difficulty to the EPB. We have not yet had the Government's response to our report. What does the Secretary of State say about the mechanism by which a local authority that no longer wishes to co-operate with an EPB can withdraw?

Hazel Blears: Again, that is a fair question, because the whole purpose of moving to an EPB is that some continuity is provided and people sign up, even though they might be from different political parties, to a set of priorities for that community. Thus, this needs to involve some legal basis, and we need to think carefully about what a notice period might be and how people might withdraw. What we do not want is people in an EPB for six months and then out of it for six months—as has been said, we do not want a hokey-cokey approach. These are very serious matters relating to developing five-year or 10-year strategies on planning and transport—big strategic issues—so people have to be signed up for a reasonable period before they are able to withdraw. However, this is a matter that we will doubtless be able to explore, as was discussed in the report.

We now have MAAs and we will have EPBs; importantly, the EPBs can be joined up with integrated transport authorities, and there will then be a single body that can take a properly integrated approach both to economic development and to transport.

Mr. Garnier *rose—*

Andrew Mackinlay *rose—*

Hazel Blears: Goodness, I am spoilt for choice. I shall give way to my hon. Friend.

Andrew Mackinlay: My right hon. Friend will regret giving way. If she looks at the *Official Report* tomorrow, she will see that all this about economic prosperity boards tying up with some other bodies is gobbledegook.

[Andrew Mackinlay]

Most people have had enough of all this. Why can we not cut away this plethora of bodies and focus on democratically elected local authorities? That is why I say to her that this is complete nonsense and that we have had enough; we want to get rid of this plethora of quangos and joint bodies, and all this linking up and partnerships—all these buzzwords. I say take it back.

Hazel Blears: I do not regret giving way, because it always good to have a healthy debate. All I would say to my hon. Friend is that I do not know how much discussion he has with the various bodies in his local community, but the people who run the health service, the police service and the council in my community feel that there is great benefit to be had from working in partnership, from pooling their budgets and from having more joined-up services, and that that provides a better service to local people.

Mr. Garnier *rose—*

Hazel Blears: No, I am not going to give way.

Mr. Garnier: I am not going to ask the same question as the hon. Gentleman.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. and learned Gentleman knows that whether or not to give way is entirely up to the Minister.

Hazel Blears: Now, I was—*[Interruption.]* There is lots of democracy in this Chamber; I have been speaking for quite a long time.

I was just making the point about transport, because it is important. Transport sometimes sits separately from other issues associated with economic development, and if our funding streams and capital allocations are not aligned with the decisions that we need to take to encourage economic development, we do not get the most out of the resource that is available to us. So, again, the approach we are taking is a positive way forward.

Mr. Garnier: This is not a humorous matter, although there have been some humorous moments this evening. Before we move on to the final parts 8 and 9 of the Bill, which deal with construction contracts, could the Secretary of State give us a running total of the number of additional bodies, quangos, boards—

Andrew Mackinlay: Partnerships.

Mr. Garnier: And partnerships. How many such bodies will this Bill create? How many such bodies will it replace—or will it add to others that currently exist? What is the total public expenditure cost of the Bill?

Hazel Blears: I have no doubt that the hon. and learned Gentleman will be pursuing that question on a regular basis while the Bill is being discussed on the Floor of the House and while it goes through Committee. I tried to make the point as kindly as I could earlier, but if he thinks that the world is still made up of a series of entirely separate, isolated and dislocated public services, he is not in touch with the communities out there. For a young offender who has difficulties in his home life, finds it hard to access training and cannot get an apprenticeship or a job, we need a series of local public services to come together in order to be able to provide the response for that young person in an integrated way—that is the way of the world these days. Hon. Members might wish to go back to the mythical halcyon days when everything was done separately in silos, but they are looking back through rose-tinted glasses. That is not the world of today, and the hon. and learned Gentleman is out of touch with reality—*[Interruption.]* I have answered him. He may not like my answer, but I have answered him.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): On the issue of construction contracts, would my right hon. Friend consider giving local authorities powers, when awarding contracts, to take into account their functions under clause 66 of the Bill to promote the economic development and regeneration of their areas, and to consider the desirability of maintaining a diverse range of contractors? In addition to value for money, local authorities should consider local economic circumstances and the position of local building firms, which are suffering severely in this recession. This legislation could help them.

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend makes a thoughtful and practical point. We can be more creative, when it comes to Government and local authority procurement, in looking at the factors that we take into account. We need to look not only at the bottom line, but at the social impact in an area. The evidence base suggests that if money is spent locally in the local community, every £1 spent has £7 worth of economic impact. If it is spent outside the area, the impact is much lower. In these tough economic times, it is very important to have local supply chains that help to create and sustain employment.

The aspects of this Bill that relate to the construction industry are about better cash flow and trying to ensure that there is an adjudication process for the industry. I think that the Bill will provide practical help for construction companies in the present climate.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I welcome the intentions of part 8 of the Bill, but much of the industry is concerned that the payment notice procedure is far too complicated. Will she undertake to look carefully at how the procedure will operate, so that it can be radically simplified and genuinely deliver real help for small businesses? Will she give a commitment to that effect today?

Hazel Blears: That will be the subject of discussion. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this Government have provided significant support to small businesses through advice and the option to defer tax and VAT. Already more than 100,000 businesses have benefited from that provision, and we have a proud record of helping business. If there is more that we can do, I am sure that that will be discussed in Committee.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): On the basis of what my right hon. Friend was saying about ordering locally, will she urge all public authorities, especially those in the home counties area, to order the excellent vans made in Luton?

Hazel Blears: I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to be a champion for Luton and the people who depend for their employment on vans and other products from the area. We must never forget the damaging impact of this recession on people's jobs, and we are determined to try to ensure that we keep people in their jobs as much as we possibly can.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): The Secretary of State is glossing over the construction provisions at the end of the Bill, which are being watched carefully by subcontractors who are suffering at the moment. If a customer becomes insolvent, the main contractor can cease paying all the subcontractors immediately, even if those subcontractors have supplied all the materials and work on time and to schedule. That is very unfair, especially in a recession, and the companies are unable to obtain insurance against it happening. The Bill does not deal with that situation, and that puzzles me. Will the Secretary of State look again at the issue? I know that other Departments are involved, but she has received representations from me and my constituents about this issue. What is her present view on it?

Hazel Blears: The provisions in this part of the Bill are primarily about trying to improve cash flow, but I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about the dislocation of the supply chain and the impact that that has particularly on small subcontractors. We want to try to make it as simple as we can—the right hon. Gentleman has made that point—and we want a procedure to resolve disputes properly. I am not in a position today to tell him whether we will be able to expand the scope of these provisions, but I think that it is very important that small businesses in the construction supply chain, in particular, have as much protection as they can.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that we have asked local authorities to pay their bills, for example, as quickly as they possibly can. Many of them now have very good payment records. One of the problems is that although they might pay the main contractor very promptly, ensuring that that goes down the supply chain is very important when it can mean the difference between a local company staying in business or not. I am conscious of these issues. I am not glossing over this part of the Bill and I want to see what I can do.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Hazel Blears: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor), who has not spoken.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way and I am keen to support the points that are being made. Small building companies are writing to me and they are very anxious. They understand the integrity of part 8 and they are very clear about its potential value, but they have made it clear to me that the form in which it is written is complex and that they would appreciate it greatly if that complexity could be resolved before the Bill becomes law.

Hazel Blears: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. As ever, she is practically focused on doing the things that matter in her constituency and to her local companies. I certainly undertake that, in Committee, we will examine the issue of complexity and making it simple and straightforward. She is so right—we have to keep many of those small building companies in business because they often employ people whose skills are essential to this country. In previous recessions, we lost those skills because we saw such companies go to the wall. We are determined to do what we can to ensure that such companies stay in business and keep employing the hundreds and thousands of local people in our communities who are so important to us.

Joan Walley: On the issue of small businesses and the part of the Bill that deals with construction companies, will my right hon. Friend consider ways in which smaller building companies can still have a part to play? There is a real fear that the joint ventures and the move towards bigger contracts are cutting out local companies from the local economy altogether. There is an urgent need to ensure that we keep that local supply chain.

Hazel Blears: That point is similar to one that was raised earlier. I am very conscious that we should ensure that we have local procurement; it is often good value for money, too.

Ms Keeble: The Bill makes provision for more transparency in the contractual process. Will there be more guidelines, in the Bill or elsewhere, for local authorities on the subcontracting done by the main contractor? Increasingly, large companies are going for local authority contracts but the way in which they then subcontract is opaque and is sometimes not open to local companies. Some extra guidance on that would be important.

Hazel Blears: It might not be a matter for these clauses, but the way in which we carry out our procurement more generally and ensure that it is transparent, open and simple for firms to access is a major priority for us. One thing that this difficult economic period has shown us is that ensuring that people can access the available contracts in a way that is appropriate to them is quite a challenge, not just to local authorities but for Government procurement, too. As a priority, we should look at the NHS and our big Government Departments—really significant economic players—and ensure that the system is as open as it can be to people in small organisations.

It is appropriate that we have just had that discussion, because the last time the UK experienced a recession, councils were pretty underfunded and were certainly demoralised. Today, I think that local authorities are thriving, innovative and powerful organisations that are well placed to respond to the challenges ahead.

Kelvin Hopkins: During the recession in the 1970s, when I was a member of a local authority, local authorities were encouraged to build tens of thousands—hundreds of thousands—of council houses, which we did. We completely housed all those on the waiting list during that time. Would my right hon. Friend not suggest that that is the way forward, both to house people and to save the construction industry?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend will know that there was £100 million in the Budget to encourage precisely such activity and that we are removing barriers that

[Hazel Blears]

prevent local authorities from building houses. He will also, I hope, be aware of the £1 billion future jobs fund that I hope will help to employ young people, in particular, in 150,000 jobs over the next two years. I am sure that many of those jobs could be in the kind of work that he has outlined, involving building good-quality, environmentally friendly homes for the people who need them.

Today, local government is thriving, innovative, powerful, and well placed to respond to the challenges ahead. The Bill is designed to reinforce that position by strengthening local democracy and supporting economic development, which are the two imperatives of our time. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.30 pm

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am sure that everyone in the Chamber with an interest in local government will have spent the past few weeks, including the recess, campaigning for the local elections. After knocking on doors daily throughout the expenses furore, I am sure that we are under no illusion that people want our democracy to work better for them, and I was glad that the Secretary of State began by acknowledging that.

On the face of it, the title of the Bill seems to hold out some promise for us all, but it is a bit misleading, which is just the first of many disappointments. Far from being a local democracy Bill, it is a charter that snatches power away from people. It is about taking power away from locally elected decision makers and giving it to regional quangos, combined authorities and economic prosperity boards—the gobbledegook, to which the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) has referred, that makes people feel distant from the political process.

The sheer fact that something as vital as strengthening local democracy has been lumped together with provisions on the construction industry and other economic aims tells us that the Government do not see strengthening local democracy as sufficiently pressing in itself. Instead, local democracy has been tagged on to a series of measures that look like remnants of other Bills that have been scraped off the floor. Why, for example, are we legislating to create a national tenant voice within a few days of the Office for Tenants and Social Landlords coming into operation? Either the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 has been found wanting or this is unnecessary duplication. No wonder my noble Friend Baroness Warsi described the Bill as a "ramshackle" piece of legislation with

"lots of motherhood and apple pie". —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 10 December 2008; Vol. 706, c. 404.]

The critique was not confined to the Conservative Benches. Noble Lords from all parties described the Bill as "an eclectic mix", "a bureaucracy Bill" and, at best, a "mixed bag".

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The hon. Lady asked why there should be a voice for tenants in addition to the Tenant Services Authority. The Cave review, which proposed the reform, makes it clear that the tenant voice is a separate function that must be discharged by a body separate from the TSA. Does she therefore agree that there is considerable good sense in the Bill's proposal?

Mrs. Spelman: The right hon. Gentleman has considerable knowledge about local government, but my point concerns the Government's legislative competence. Given that the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 went through both Houses of Parliament, why was the opportunity not taken to legislate on precisely the point in the Cave review to which he has referred?

Peter Luff: In the light of the criticism admirably made by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) about the complexity of the Bill, my hon. Friend might like to know that my Committee's report on the Bill is the first that has required a glossary at the beginning so that people can find their way through it—I commend the glossary to the House.

Mrs. Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for referring hon. Members to where they can find out how to understand the language used in the Bill.

I have long held a theory that the longer the title of a Bill, the more delphic its content, and this Bill is no different. I say that advisedly as the author of a book snappily titled "Non-food uses of agricultural raw materials: Economics, biotechnology and politics". Needless to say, the book did not find its way on to Richard and Judy's bestseller list.

To return to the matter in hand, over and over again I found myself writing, "Why do we need to do this?" in the margins beside the clauses of the Bill. So much of the Bill is plain common sense, or is already best practice for some councils. Best practice should be spread by councils sharing and emulating the good ideas that well-run councils introduce, but does it need a change in the law to tell them how to do that? I do not think so. Will more legislation make councils do their jobs better? I doubt it. It will stifle innovation and suppress diversity, and I happen to believe that diversity drives up standards. Diversity is a far better tool for change than the dead hand of the state. The Bill is simply legislation for legislation's sake. By that, I mean that it is unnecessary, and even counter-productive for being so prescriptive.

I invite hon. Members to admit that half the contents of the Bill are things that most decent local authorities are doing anyway. Why are we using valuable time in the Chamber, in Committee and in the other place debating legislation that dictates when, where and how councils go about promoting democracy? On the evidence of the Bill, I venture to suggest that Ministers should not be giving advice to anyone about how to promote democracy. Why not trust councils, which have to secure their own mandate, to manage their own ways of promoting democracy, and let them be judged by the voters?

Mr. Curry: Does my hon. Friend think that it is a promotion of democracy to seek to bring the Bill out of Committee on 18 June, given that it is unlikely to go into Committee until a week tomorrow?

Mrs. Spelman: My right hon. Friend highlights a problem that is part of the general frustration felt by the public, which we parliamentarians share. Through the guillotining and timetabling of Bills, we have seen an

awful lot of legislation not scrutinised properly in this place and then seen it prove to be undeliverable or unworkable in practice, so he is absolutely right to point out that the time constraint is likely to cause more problems of that kind. I add to that the fact that 170 amendments were introduced in the House of Lords, so one has to ask oneself how well prepared it was in the first place and how much work hon. Members will have to do on it in this place.

Similarly, why do measures on petition-handling and involvement in public authority functions need to be prescribed from the centre? Why not let councils get on with it themselves? If we really want a Bill that deals with petitions, let us start by getting our own House in order, literally. The Scottish Parliament really impressed me with the way in which its petitions are used to shape legislation. That contrasts sharply with the way in which petitions seem to have such a limited effect here in Westminster. How many petitions have hon. Members seen disappear into the green baize purse on the back of the Speaker's Chair to which there is never any reply? I certainly find that disempowering, and I am sure that those who sign them do, too, but that is a bigger debate for another day.

The problem with prescribing processes, such as those for petition-handling by councils, in tiny detail by statute is that one ends up creating an expensive new compliance industry, with town hall officials chasing targets and ticking boxes. The same applies to the requirements for economic assessments in part 4 of the Bill. Is the Secretary of State honestly trying to tell me that she thinks that local authorities do not already carry out local economic assessments? At best, that is a textbook example of what my noble Friend Baroness Warsi described in another place as "prescriptive overdrive". At worst, it is an example of Ministers using legislation to strengthen Whitehall's whip hand over the town hall. I did not hear an answer to the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) about what happens when authorities do not carry out the new duties that the Secretary of State has in mind.

By seeking to codify, monitor and sanction areas of activity where local authorities have been creating successful new ways of doing things, the Government are regressing further and further into defensive, top-down centralising. How telling is it that in its original form, the Bill gave the Secretary of State the power to change any economic assessment with which she disagrees? That gives the lie to the phrase, "Whitehall knows best." How on earth does that stack up with devolving more power to local communities? It does not.

Mr. Kilfoyle: The hon. Lady rightly emphasises the prescriptive nature of parts of the Bill. She implies, in her critique, a need for devolution down to a local level. I want to hear what her party proposes in terms of devolving real power down to a local level.

Mrs. Spelman: Unless I am very much mistaken, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) has serious misgivings about the accretion of power at the regional level to quangos in his area. I can tell him that that would go under a future Conservative Government.

In large part, this is a Bill about taking power away from communities and their elected representatives. For evidence of that, we need look no further than the way in which it entrenches the role of unelected, unpopular and unaccountable regional government. I do not understand why the Government are so determined to undermine local democracy through their obsession with regionalism. The one region that was given a say on regional government voted by a majority of 80:20 against it, yet it was ignored and regional government has been steamrollered out across the country ever since.

Regional government is an albatross around the neck of local councils, and it is time that the whole costly and needless project was ditched. Can the Secretary of State understand why those untouchable regional monoliths are so disliked? They are outmoded and unwanted. Until a Bill comes before the House pledging their abolition, they will continue to be the Achilles heel of local government. Lord Judd gave the game away when he said this in another place:

> "I understand the Government's wish not to be too prescriptive and not to undermine autonomy, which they want to see regions exercising."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 29 April 2009; Vol. 710, c. 244.]

There we have it—regional autonomy. That surely explains why, rather than aborting regional government, part 5 transfers planning powers from regional assemblies to regional development agencies. In short, it transfers powers from one unaccountable quango to another.

I am at a loss to reconcile that with the stated aim of the Bill, which is to empower local government and communities. Regional government has been tried and tested, and it has been found wanting by every reasonable measure. The Bill should abolish regional housing and planning at a stroke. Colleagues will know from their own experience that more often than not, when people have a complaint about the scale and location of new development, the new development originated in the region. With no regard for the local environment, the infrastructure or sustainability, housing targets are forced on communities, leaving them and their elected representatives powerless.

Is it any wonder that planning has become so controversial and new development is constantly met with such hostility? As the Campaign to Protect Rural England has put it:

> "Some parts of the Bill will result in communities feeling even more confused about, and disengaged by, the planning system."

There must be a better way to get the new housing that we need.

Julia Goldsworthy: A number of amendments were tabled by the Conservatives in the Lords to withdraw from the regional spatial strategy and to push power and resources down to local authority level. Is the hon. Lady embarrassed that more Liberal Democrats than Conservatives turned out to support those amendments? How will she ensure that there is the same enthusiasm on the Back Benches as she is describing on the Front Bench?

Mrs. Spelman: I am rarely embarrassed by Liberal Democrats; usually, the most I feel is sorry for them. The strong proposals that we made in our green paper on the shift of power back to the local level is not matched in any concrete way by anything the Liberal Democrats have proposed to return power to the local level.

The official Opposition have pledged to abolish regional planning and housing, and instead give communities a real incentive to deliver the right kind of housing in the

[Mrs. Spelman]

right places. Ask communities if they would like incremental growth in their towns and villages, and most would welcome it as a way of sustaining local services and delivering homes that their children can afford to buy and accommodation that their elderly can step down to so that they can live near their friends. But force massive new developments on those towns and villages, with no infrastructure and no regard for the character of the neighbourhood, and those communities will resist them at every opportunity. So let us get away from that top-down, centrally determined, regionally imposed approach. That is old politics.

Let us move from the stick to the carrot and look at what communities can reasonably absorb and what they will benefit from. Then let us give them clear incentives to deliver new housing, such as our proposal for matching council tax proceeds for every new house built for the first six years. That would give councils an immediate 100 per cent. increase in the amount of revenue generated by creating new homes. Responsible local authorities that currently have record housing waiting lists can be trusted to deliver the right homes that we need in the right places.

Kelvin Hopkins: As always, the Conservatives focus on owner-occupation. Last week, however, there was a report that 67 per cent. of young people have almost given up on the prospect of owning their own homes, especially as mortgages will be more restricted in future. Is it not a reality that, for most people, a decent home with a garden and proper bedrooms will mean a local authority home? If we are to house most of our population decently, we will have to recreate the local authority sector as it once was.

Mrs. Spelman: I hear the hon. Gentleman, but I have said nothing about tenure, and from evidence we all know that mixing tenure is the right way forward. He spoke with a misty-eyed nostalgia for the 1970s, I think, when the rate of social house building was significantly higher. But how comfortable does he feel about representing a party that for the past 12 years has built social housing at half the rate of the previous Conservative Administration? That point requires some careful thought.

It is depressing that a Bill with "Local Democracy" in its title contains almost nothing about freeing up and empowering councils. The Government's distrust of democracy is such that the Bill's only gesture towards local involvement is a leaders' board. However, the board will have no right of veto, and, as a former party chairman, I can tell the House that a board's right of veto is often what gives it real teeth.

Ms Dari Taylor: I am listening with great care to the hon. Lady, and I hope that she will reciprocate. She was right to say that the northern region rejected the whole concept of a regional assembly, but she was quite wrong to state that local governments and local councils do not work together. In the sub-region of the Tees, we work together effectively on housing and spatial issues, because the distinctions between Middlesbrough, Stockton, Redcar and south Cleveland are indecipherable. Joint working by councils is greatly valued, so to knock it or to understate its value is not appropriate.

Mrs. Spelman: The hon. Lady perhaps misunderstood me, because at no point did I say that local authorities do not work together; in fact, I encourage them to do so. However, we should not be prescriptive about which local authorities work together. I accept that in the north-east, which is one of the smaller regions, most local authorities feel a sense of identity with the area, but I hate to tell the hon. Lady that some parts of the country feel that they do not fit in very well with the artificial regions that her Government have created.

If one speaks to voters in Banbury, one finds that they remain completely nonplussed by the suggestion that, according to the Government's artificial regions, they are part of the south-east. They do not feel part of the south-east. Similarly, people in Gloucestershire feel a long way from Cornwall, so we should question the artificiality of the over-prescriptive requirements for local authorities to work in certain regions, and certain regions alone. It is better to allow local authorities to cluster and work together in the groups that they recognise as most practical and effective, and with which voters identify.

Sir Paul Beresford: The previous intervention backs up my hon. Friend's point, because some local authorities have worked together for 20, 30, 40 or 50 years. When the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) was a union official, keeping a close eye on a local authority with which I had some links, there was close co-operation between four local authorities of a mixed political complexion. If Red Ted Knight—that name might ring a bell among historians—and I could work together successfully in a unit of four, anybody can.

Mrs. Spelman: My hon. Friend has real hands-on experience of running a local authority, and there is the proof that it is perfectly possible to work together in groups across the political divide. Indeed, in the west midlands area, to which my constituency belongs, the seven metropolitan authorities have always worked together, whatever the political complexion of their leadership. I am confident that if we allow local authorities to choose the clusters to which they want to belong, they will come up with the right solution.

Hazel Blears: Does the hon. Lady not accept that the Bill is based entirely on the premise that such organisations of local authorities will be voluntary? Every single bit—whether multi-area agreements, economic prosperity boards or integrated authorities—is bottom-up, rather than being imposed from the top. The Bill is about whether people in a local authority want to work with their neighbours in exactly the way described by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford).

Mrs. Spelman: I thank the Secretary of State. The point is, however, that the artificial regions created by her Government are fixed. *[Interruption.]* They may not be fixed in the Bill, but they are part of what she calls the "architecture" within which local authorities will work. I shall be delighted if she joins my call for the abolition of those artificial regions; that would be popular with the public.

I move on to the remit of the regional development agencies. The transfer of planning powers is just the latest example of the mission creep that has led to

RDAs being diverted from the vital task for which they were originally set up—stimulating business growth. In the depths of a recession, it surely makes no sense to saddle RDAs with regional planning, which is one of the most bureaucratic, time-consuming, controversial and unwieldy responsibilities.

RDAs should focus on one thing only—getting British business back on its feet. The best way to do that is to refocus them solely on economic development and let councils define how they work and what areas they cover. If the voters do not like it, they can express their view at the ballot box, which would give clarity and accountability. The current role of RDAs goes to the heart of the combined authorities and economic prosperity boards that are dealt with in part 6 of the Bill. So much of the detail is still unclear. Who will be on those bodies? Who will appoint them? When will the bodies come into being and how will they be funded? Critically, how will they work with the RDAs?

Martin Horwood: Will the hon. Lady clarify something? She has recommended a purely economic role for the regional development agencies. Is she planning to retain them?

Mrs. Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is a Liberal Democrat, so I do not blame him for not having read the Conservative party's green paper "Control Shift". Our position is genuinely localist. If the hon. Gentleman's local authority in Cheltenham wanted a development agency, it could have one; it would, however, be accountable to the public for that decision. I encourage his local authority to group together with others to get critical mass. Economies of scale can be gained if local authorities work together in what I would describe as an economic partnership. I heartily commend the green paper to the hon. Gentleman; in fact, I have a copy at my disposal if he feels like briefing himself this evening about a better view of how to work with regional development agencies.

Andrew Mackinlay: I am being goaded by my party's Front Benchers about this business of partnership. My case is this. I do not know whether anyone is aware of where Thurrock is, but it comes under the same region as Norwich and Walsingham—it could be the other side of the moon. Clearly, there needs to be collaboration along the Thames Gateway. About 10 Ministers ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) should have created a region for the north Thames corridor, which would have made economic and planning sense and involved collaboration with local authorities. Instead, we have the nonsense of Thurrock being in the same pot as Norwich and Walsingham, which is crackpot. We want to reduce the number of bodies and maximise collaboration. We want housing where it is necessary, rather than there being bodies discussing housing only to have their plans frustrated by the Department and by the regional bodies, which put 1,000 problems in the way—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. As the hon. Gentleman knows, interventions must be brief. I think that he got his point across.

Mrs. Spelman: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will agree with me, I think, that this afternoon is turning out to be interesting. I have probably heard more frank speaking from the Government Benches about this legislation than I have about any other Bill on which I have spoken for my party. Perhaps there has been an outbreak of frank political consensus, which would be welcome, on the right way forward, based on common sense. I am encouraged. The Secretary of State was gallant in taking as many interventions as she did; the number of interventions indicates that on both sides of the House we want the system to work better for the people who vote for us and for a political system that should serve them well. I take encouragement from the intervention made by the hon. Member for Thurrock.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I am somewhat puzzled by the distinctions that the hon. Lady is drawing as regards voluntary arrangements. Several local authorities in my area—they are controlled not by one particular party, but by different parties—have signed up to a multi-area agreement on a voluntary basis. That greatly enhances their ability to deal with several issues of mutual interest, which is reflected in the arrangements in the Bill that will allow them to take such issues forward. Are those authorities wrong, or have they got it right in terms of things that they are doing that are in line with the Bill?

Mrs. Spelman: If the hon. Gentleman waits for a couple of minutes, I am about to discuss multi-area agreements.

The principle of authorities joining forces to deliver prosperity is a good one—that is not in dispute—and one that Conservative Members have always promoted, but for it to succeed, it cannot be buried under the morass of unaccountable regional government. These boards have the potential to flourish, but only if they are unfettered by regional boundaries and bureaucracy. It is exactly the same with multi-area agreements, which are mentioned in part 7. Yes, they are a good thing, and yes, councils should be entering into them where appropriate, but does the matter need to be prescribed in legislation? It makes sense for councils to work in that way. I am glad to see the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) nod his head a tiny bit in agreement. Will multi-area agreements ever fulfil their potential as drivers for cross-border working while they are in the shade of a regional edifice?

Having spent some time talking about the local government and economic development aspects of the Bill, I would turn to the construction aspect—if only the Bill had one! People in the construction industry must have thought that they had lost some of the Bill's pages when they first read it—and, goodness me, it is long enough. When profits are in freefall and work has stopped on construction sites up and down the country, the Government have introduced only nit-picking details about contracts. The construction industry clearly feels that the Bill is an opportunity to help it, but where is the ambition and the imagination? Instead of setting out ideas to kick-start regeneration or deliver new infrastructure, the Bill is confined to what I call contractual etiquette. Frankly, the construction industry and the country deserve better.

The source of my disappointment with the Bill is that it had the potential to breathe fresh life into local democracy. Instead, it is more like the death rattle of a Government who have run out of ideas. It smacks of a

[Mrs. Spelman]

Department desperate to be seen to be doing something. Perhaps it is because the community empowerment Bill seems to have been dropped that the Secretary of State feels that the Department has to "make busy".

To be fair, Ministers have been busy exploring ideas in the White Paper entitled "Communities in control". Two of the most interesting ideas mooted in that document concern making it easier for councillors to vote and encouraging people to turn up at the ballot box. One solution, we are told, is to enable councillors to vote remotely, perhaps—who knows?—from their sofa or from the pub. As for getting people to take part in local elections, there are various exciting options such as free entry to a prize draw if people vote or a free doughnut for every vote cast; the list goes on. What is so telling about the White Paper is the extent to which it completely misdiagnoses why people are so switched off from local government. It is not because councillors cannot be bothered to go the town hall or because voters would rather be doing lottery scratchcards—it is because people see how local government is overruled by the centre at every stage. The Bill should address head on the priorities of communities up and down the country who are crying out for more say over the decisions that affect their neighbourhoods.

The truth is that the Bill would have carried twice as much weight if it had been half the size and dealt with only two issues—planning and council tax. How is it that we are debating a Bill about local government that ignores the fury about rising council tax? This year, Ministers happily referred to seeing the lowest level of increase for some years; meanwhile, most people were staggered that it went up at all, given that the average council tax bill has more than doubled since 1997. It is a real cause of pain for hard-working families and people on fixed incomes. The Government should have grasped that issue. How about a council tax freeze of the kind that we have offered? How about giving communities the right to block excessive council tax rises through a referendum? That would be local democracy at work.

Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley) (Lab): I have listened carefully to what the hon. Lady has said, and I agree with her, not my party's Front Benchers, on some things. However, I found her latest statement quite astounding. She had been making the case for local democracy, but then she said quite blatantly, "But we will control the level of taxation." Is it not the case that what will really stimulate local democracy is a direct relationship between local services and the money raised to pay for them, which can be dealt with at the ballot box?

Mrs. Spelman: I think that the hon. Gentleman rose to intervene before he heard my last sentence. Putting an end to capping from the centre, but allowing the local population to cap council tax increases through a referendum, if necessary, is genuine local democracy.

The Government have pushed on regardless and are now gearing up for a revaluation in 2010. We know that because they have just renewed their contract with Rightmove, which means that data on nine out of 10 house sales will be imported to a Government database, ready to be used as a means of driving up council tax even further through revaluation. When will the Government realise that we need to help people by getting the tax burden down?

Mr. Raynsford: Does the hon. Lady believe that it is right for all council tax valuations to be based on notional 1991 values? If she does not, when does she believe that it is appropriate for the register to be updated to take account of the change in values since that time? As she will recognise, 1991 was a very long time ago.

Mrs. Spelman: The right hon. Gentleman is very knowledgeable about local government, and we have debated revaluation many times. He will know that one purpose for which revaluations are prescribed in legislation is to deal with regional differences in house price increases. The reality of the sad point that we have reached in the housing crisis is that the degree of regional variation is not marked, so the case for a revaluation is not there.

There is exactly the same problem with business rates. There is something slightly surreal about debating a Bill at a time of economic crisis that has the words "Economic Development" in its title but that does nothing to address business rates. Our country's recovery from recession will be determined by how well our businesses compete with those from overseas. Instead of giving them a helping hand, the Treasury has given them a smack in the teeth by increasing business rates above inflation and pushing ahead with business rate revaluation. Those things are conspiring to undermine businesses at a time when we need to help them. Deferring an above-inflation business rate increase is no panacea, because it will still have to be paid. Anyone running or working in a business whose amount of work is shrinking exists in a world of anxiety, and any small business looking for comfort in the Bill will not find any.

The situation is similar for port-related businesses. I had to suppress some shock at the difficulty we had in trying to get an amendment about port taxes in order in the other place. Colleagues might imagine that if there is one virtue in such a convoluted Bill title, it is that it provides an opportunity to debate almost anything. However, that does not seem to include port taxes, despite the fact that they clearly come under the aegis of local democracy and play an undeniable role in economic development. Port businesses have had a huge unexpected tax rise, backdated to 2005, at a time when recession is biting. It simply defies belief that the Government will not give any quarter. No impact assessment was done; there was no consultation; and businesses are casually being handed debts that, in many cases, will make them balance-sheet insolvent.

Those are big, urgent, immediate issues, which are at the front of people's minds. Does the Secretary of State understand how people will look at this Bill? They will read it, listen to the debate and think that politicians are from another planet. How ironic that no more than eight hours after the Prime Minister told Radio 4:

"Power must be more accountable to the people who elect MPs and councillors",

we have a Bill that does exactly the opposite. The Prime Minister held forth this morning about listeners feeling powerless and politics not being sufficiently accountable. If the Bill is supposed to be the solution, God help us. Let us face it, people are fed up. They are fed up with

the recession and the pain it brings; they are fed up with MPs; and they are fed up with the Government. The Bill should have been a chance to begin to put things right and make politics relevant again. Instead, I fear that it will do the opposite.

When I meet voters, they are beside themselves with frustration about the imposition of unsustainable numbers of houses on their communities. Mums in the playground are really angry that a mobile phone mast has gone up right next door to the school, despite Government recommendations that it should not. I understand that the silent majority seek a silent revolution. They want politics to change, but, far from delivering that, the Bill serves up more of the same. It has been cobbled together to fill the parliamentary programme and give Ministers more levers to pull. The Bill is about keeping control over councils via the statute book, because the Government cannot do it through the ballot box. People deserve better than that.

The political landscape has changed beyond recognition since the Bill was in another place. The public's fury over expenses is not only about money, but a reflex against the entire nature of our broken politics—the top-down, centrally imposed decision making and the inflexible, insensitive bureaucracy that bosses people about from day to day. Supporting the Bill would send a clear message that we are not listening to the electorate. Unless we discharge real power, the current animosity between the public and Parliament will simply turn into a long goodbye.

The Prime Minister got one thing right when he said that recent events had exposed a big need for a real change in our politics, but he got it wrong when he suggested that he and his Government were the right people to deliver it. The Bill makes it abundantly clear that a public hungry for change in politics will get that only through a change of Government.

5.6 pm

Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley) (Lab): The history of the last 65 years is one of increasing centralisation of democracy in this country, in three phases. After the second world war and until the 1970s, the utilities and health services were taken out of local government hands, in many cases for good reasons. After two world wars and lack of investment, the gas and electricity industries and many hospitals were not in a good state. None the less, services that had been developed locally and were responsive to local electors were nationalised, and eventually, in the next phase, they were privatised.

Baroness Thatcher started the next phase, which lasted through the 1980s and into the 1990s. It involved more centralisation, but with an explicit and direct hostility towards local democracy. The Conservative party then fundamentally believed that services were better provided by the private sector. Nicholas Ridley believed that councils should meet only once a year to hand out contracts to the private sector to deliver services. If something could not be done by the private sector, quangos were considered better than local democracy.

The third phase is that of my Government, who have been much gentler with local democracy; the rhetoric has been different. Even so, there has been an increase in centralisation and central missives to local authorities, to the absurd extent that, in one year, the Secretary of State for education sent out 4,000 pages to head teachers alone. That is extraordinary. Quangos have frequently been preferred to local councils because Ministers said that delivery of local services was often patchy. When considering quangos, "patchy" is a description to which one would aspire when assessing some services that they produced.

Most of the decisions by central Government and by the officials who make recommendations to Ministers have been based on the myth that central Government are more efficient, effective and economical than local government. I am prepared to give way to any Minister or other hon. Member who can provide evidence to show that the delivery of services by central Government is better than by local government. Most local authorities keep within their budgets when most parts of central Government have a poor record of doing so. Indeed, if we assessed the worst local authorities in the 1980s—Hackney and Liverpool are not controversial examples of poor local authorities—against the Home Office, which a previous Home Secretary described as dysfunctional, which would be found to be the better deliverer of services? Would it be the Home Office, which regularly loses my constituents' records and overspends its budget, or the Hackney and Liverpool of the 1980s?

One can make all sorts of comparisons with quangos that deliver government services and with local authorities that are not doing so well currently, and I will give a couple of examples before getting to the details of the Bill. I am not making party political points, but I doubt whether there was any more profligate or inefficient waste of money under the previous Conservative Government than the Child Support Agency, which has not delivered services. If anything was a greater waste of money, as well as being unfair, it was the poll tax, which we are still paying for in extra VAT. The poll tax was completely unfair and cost us about £20 billion. However, the Learning and Skills Council, a more recent quango set up by my Government that we are part way through investigating in the Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills, has let a capital programme get out of hand in a way that I have never witnessed in a local authority.

The Learning and Skills Council has not only let a capital programme get completely out of hand, but—*[Interruption.]* I suspect that my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) is saying that he has seen some local authority budgets get out of hand, and they have. However, I doubt whether he has seen anything like what the Learning and Skills Council did. Not only did the budget get out of hand, but the Learning and Skills Council changed all the priorities, so that, under a Labour Government, the money went to the wealthiest areas in the country and the poorest areas got very little. In Yorkshire, Bradford got nothing and the adjacent rich Tory areas got a great deal of capital expenditure. Indeed, we can look all around the country for further examples.

Mr. Kilfoyle: My hon. Friend has moved on now, but I was quite taken by his reference to the efficiency, or lack of it, of Hackney and Liverpool in the 1980s, which still bore comparison with central Government. He will recall well that councillors were removed from office at that time because of a notional loss of £110,000

[Mr. Kilfoyle]

due to the late setting of a rate. Can he tell me of any Minister who has been removed from office for the loss of a comparable sum or for any reason whatever?

Graham Stringer: I cannot do that. There is no set of laws or rules that apply to Ministers or civil servants that are equivalent to those that apply to elected councils and local government officers.

Andrew Mackinlay: Before my hon. Friend moves on from the history of local government over the past few years, may I invite him and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to pause and reflect on the fact that under both Prime Minister Blair and the current Prime Minister, we have had a revolving door of Local Government Ministers, particularly Ministers responsible for housing construction? I might have exaggerated when I said earlier that my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) was the Minister about 10 Ministers ago, but there is constant change and no settlement, and people are never properly on board. I predict that by next Tuesday there will be different Ministers responsible for housing and construction again. I am not referring to anybody in particular—they can be good, bad or indifferent—but the Prime Minister keeps changing people. It is ludicrous. There is no settlement and we suffer from that.

Graham Stringer: That takes me away from what I was saying, but it is a substantial point.

Julia Goldsworthy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way. I will attempt to bring him back to the direction in which I think he was going. Is this not the critical difference between the ineffectiveness of quangos and that of local authorities: ultimately people have the right to vote out local authorities that are not run in the way that they wish? Is it not disappointing that the opportunity was not taken in the Bill to make the quangos that we need more accountable and to get rid of the ones that we do not need at all?

Graham Stringer: The hon. Lady makes a point that I am coming to in about two minutes. However, to return to the point about wasting money, I have written down about 20 examples, whose costs run into billions of pounds. The grossest one, for which I can find no local government equivalent, is the exams fiasco last year. A process that had previously cost £10 million nationally now cost £610 million and went completely wrong, so that young people taking exams did not know their results and, when they did know them, suspected that they were wrong.

There is no evidence base for saying that central Government is better than local government, although I also looked at what Ministers have been saying. The most explicit quote that I could find was from my right hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who said that local taxing would lead to

"the worst kind of nimbyism...inequalities and...conservatism".

I do not agree with her. I believe that local taxing, local democracy and the right to throw the rascals out, as the Americans put it in one presidential election, are absolutely fundamental to what our society should be about.

Before I move on to the details of the Bill, I want to mention two principles that ought to underlie it, and to point out that the Bill does not live up to the requirement that they involve. Neither principle would be thought strange in most other democracies. One is that democracy and the local taxation of services are related. If someone stands for election, they should say what money they are going to raise, and win or lose the vote on that basis. The second would involve a pretty fundamental change in how we think about things in this country. It is that central Government should justify their spending decisions to local government, rather than the other way around, because the evidence is that local government is better at it.

I shall turn now to the details of the Bill. Clause 1 covers duties relating to the promotion of democracy—a matter that was also raised in the debate in the other place. If we look at the House of Commons guide to the Bill, we see that the provisions, which will tell people how to become councillors, how to access services and how to send in information, are going to cost local authorities about £22 million. Compared with some of the sums that we are talking about, that is not a great deal of money. It probably equates to a couple of posts per local authority around the country. The provision is completely unnecessary, however. I asked one of the people who works for me to find out on the internet how to become a local councillor and how to get all the necessary information. Within five minutes, the Directgov website had pointed us towards other websites and we had all the information that we needed. As I have said, not a great deal of money is involved, but clause 1 is really unnecessary.

The point was well made by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) as well as by some Labour Members that most local authorities already take petitions. The fact is that everyone, whether they write a letter or send a petition to a local authority, deserves a response and should get one. I very much doubt that we need prescriptive legislation to achieve that. We just need a statement to that effect.

The biggest issue relating to local democracy in my area in the past 12 months was the referendum on the proposals for a congestion charge in Greater Manchester, which would have created the largest congestion charge zone in the world. However, there were no real powers in place to enable that referendum to be held. In fact, it was held under section 116 of the Local Government Act 2003, and it could have been held under section 170 of the Transport Act 2000. As a result, there were no real rules for holding that referendum, in which more than 1 million people participated.

Covering such circumstances would have been a more useful purpose for the Bill. I certainly have doubts about referendums, but there is no doubt that the electorate out there like the idea of holding a referendum on certain key issues. The one in the northern region has been mentioned, and there was also the one in Greater Manchester. Both had a higher turnout than the local elections, and we have to respect people's views in this regard. It is within the terms of the Bill's long title for this legislation to become a vehicle for putting regulations in place so we no longer need to hold referendums under strange parts of the Local Government Act. Having to do that in Greater Manchester meant that the so-called returning officer, Sir Neil McIntosh,

who was paid £30,000 to do the job, could decide to consult only the promoters of the relevant Bill on what question to put, and did not put into the main question on the referendum paper the most controversial aspect of the proposal—the levying of a congestion charge or a new tax on people. Also, he would not see people such as myself who were opposed to the proposals. I think that that is quite scandalous. More than 2 million people were entitled to vote in that referendum and more than 1 million people did, and we should use this Bill to codify the procedure so that that sort of situation cannot happen again. In fact, the returning officer was so biased that the arrangement actually worked in favour of the no rather than the yes campaign.

We have already discussed the regional development agencies and I would like to ask Ministers to clarify some issues relating to the north-west and co-operation. I have always made my views on RDAs clear: they should not have been set up and they should be abolished as quickly as possible, because they have no role whatever. It is not a question of businesses liking RDAs, as the Secretary of State suggested. No, they do not like RDAs, but they like the possibility of getting grants from them. So long as the money is not abolished and does not disappear, businesses would be pleased to get rid of the bureaucracy and deal directly with local authorities.

I would particularly like to ask my Front-Bench colleagues whether they agree with the following statement from Steven Broomhead, the chief executive of the Northwest Regional Development Agency, who said that there was

"not a shred of evidence that local authorities can deliver economic development on the ground".

Does anyone in the Chamber agree with that? I think that it is the kind of arrogance that comes with unaccountable quangos; it is not a basis for co-operation. I hope that my right hon. Friend will take note of that statement; I can give her the full reference if she wants it. It remains the case that, sometimes with the encouragement of officials, these quangos see themselves as in competition with local elected councils. They could not be more blatant in seeing themselves as delivering better services than local authorities do.

As with the delivery of services by central Government, however, the reality is different. Because these quangos and RDAs have no democratic mandate, it is difficult for them—I want to be fair—to take decisions. They reach lowest common denominator decisions, where everything becomes a priority: seaside towns are a priority, as are rural communities, Cumbria and core cities. Until we look at the numbers involved and find out what is being consulted on, it is difficult to establish what exactly is happening. When we try to look at where the money is going, it becomes inexplicable.

RDAs should be spending money on two main areas: primarily, creating a better economy and more jobs, and supporting regeneration. However, the money does not go to the areas where we would expect the most added value. The centre of Manchester, for example, should be responsible for 40 per cent. of the GVA—gross value added—for the north-west, and the centre of Liverpool for a significant chunk of the funds, yet the money is spread out quite differently with no justification. My solution is for the Government to take decisions. They should inquire whether the money is there for economic development or to alleviate poverty in some way—the two main reasons for spending public money—and explain what is happening, in a way that the RDA, as it runs around in different directions, does not. What is the Bill's response to that problem? It is to consult leaders' panels, but that does not deal with the fundamental democratic deficit. What it does is take the level up and provide some form of fig leaf for the regional development agencies that allows them to carry on, but it does not allow people a say at the ballot box.

Let me finish my remarks. The Bill is a lost opportunity. I believe that local authorities—they are not perfect, and some are poor—are better than quangos at delivering economic development and other services. Even more fundamental, however, is the fact that local authorities are immediately accountable to the people through the ballot box. One of the aims of the Local Transport Act 2008 was to transfer highways powers to the integrated transport authorities. Combining that with leaders' boards or prosperity boards or whatever they may be called, consisting of indirectly elected people, may well remove not only the highways powers but a series of other powers from people. They will not be able to say, "I do not want those double yellow lines in front of my shops, but I do want investment," because they cannot vote for or against those with whom they must deal.

Martin Horwood: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech and a powerful case. Is there not a risk that the establishment of leaders' boards will repeat the mistake made with regard to the regional assemblies? In the south-west at least, there was rarely any kind of contested vote. The proceedings ended up being strongly influenced by officers who spent as much time talking to the Government offices as talking to representatives who had been elected, even in an indirect capacity.

Graham Stringer: That is one possibility. A stronger possibility is that deals will be done without the involvement of the electorate. There is a democratic deficit which the Bill will not solve. The English regions in particular already suffer because they are disadvantaged financially by the Barnett formula. What people really want from the Bill is clear democracy.

Let me give two examples. People want to be able to go to their local councillor—as people have come to me in my capacity as a Member of Parliament and in my capacity as a councillor—and say "We have bad private landlords and we want you, as a council, to regulate them." It has taken nearly 12 years, under a Labour Government, to create a regulatory scheme. That should not have come near Government: it should have been up to local authorities to alleviate people's problems with bad landlords and bad neighbours. Similarly, people are concerned when their buses do not turn up. We have more powers to deal with that than we used to have, but we are still left with a deregulated bus system.

Anyone who talks to people in shopping parades or advice bureaux will know that those are two of the immediate problems that regularly arise, and that such people are not particularly interested in finding out how to become a councillor or in the detailed names of the quangos to which the Bill refers. We should be legislating to solve the real problems that I have described.

5.27 pm

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Graham Stringer), who made a thoughtful speech. As he said, the Bill provides opportunities; it is just a question of how we make the most of them, given the obvious deficiencies in what we have at present.

I think there is common ground throughout the House on the rhetoric about devolving responsibilities to the local level and giving people a say, but a real division when it comes to how that is to be delivered and whether the words are backed up by actions. I know that the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) likes diversity, but that tells me more about how she voted in "Britain's Got Talent" than about her party's position on the devolution of power. Most of the correspondence arriving in my letter box expresses the opinion that the Conservatives would prevent local authorities from having any say in, for example, the way rubbish is collected. It is obviously difficult for the Conservatives to square providing all this autonomy with reserving the right to lay down the law centrally on issues such as taxation. The council tax freeze is nothing other than a centralised measure.

Mrs. Spelman: I feel that I should correct the record. The bin tax is driven by central Government's desire to establish an architecture in which local authorities are cash-strapped and encouraged to buttress the shortfall in their funding. The localist view is that they should be free to decide.

Julia Goldsworthy: I was not aware that the Conservatives were happy for local authorities to press forward with variance in things such as bin collections should they wish to do so—that was not my understanding at all. I thought the hon. Lady was intervening to tell me that she voted for Susan Boyle, so what she said was slightly unexpected.

The Secretary of State's contribution took me back to when I was first appointed as my party's local government spokesperson, because some of the advice I received then was that it is very easy to get sucked into local government finance, which is very technical, and structures. On the local democracy side of things, I share her honourable intentions in trying to give people a voice and setting up structures that are responsible to the people, but I fear that this Bill has morphed into the architecture for delivering services—I believe those were her words—and there is far more about setting up structures that are there for administrative convenience, rather than for the benefit of the people they are supposed to serve.

It is ironic to be debating this issue in this House, given that the mechanics of making local democracy work are what is happening on the doorsteps all over the country. We are sitting in this air-conditioned bubble talking about the theory and the structures, but what really makes local democracy work is the volunteers who go out to make their case on the doorsteps and to encourage people to turn out. It is also ironic that we are, in theory, debating this from a position of moral strength—we are telling local authorities how they should be doing it—given that we are doing so much at the moment to undermine people's faith in our democratic institutions.

I am frustrated that we are looking at local democracy in isolation. Surely if we wish to restore people's faith in a process, we have to go through it from top to bottom. That means that we cannot just talk about constitutional reform at one end; we have to talk about how that translates from the grass roots right up to the very top. I am slightly concerned that we are siphoning off this particular aspect. That does not do us any good and does not make the most of the available opportunities.

The Bill is an opportunity to make sweeping changes to restore accountability and to rebuild confidence from the grass roots up. This is something in which I strongly believe: part of the reason I got involved in politics was the feeling that the community in which I was born and brought up did not have a voice. I felt that if I could play a role in getting its voice heard, in whatever way possible, by taking part in a political process, not only would I enjoy that, but it would have a value and purpose. That was why I supported the Sustainable Communities Bill, both when it was first introduced and later when it was taken on as a private Member's Bill.

That Bill was all about setting up processes that mean not only that people can participate, but that there is an impact on the outcome. What frustrates people, and the reason they do not vote, is not that they do not have opportunities to do so, or that the voting age is not low enough or that the offer of an iPod is not being thrown in; they do not vote because they do not think that voting will have an impact on the outcome. If people feel that something will make a difference, they are more than willing to do it. I have seen so many parish plans whereby the whole community has got together to identify the key issues in making its village more sustainable, and the point at which people have got disillusioned is when they have found out that they can do little to deliver the things that they want.

The same applies in respect of, for example, consultations. The problem is that participation is now a dirty word, because people think it is used just to pay lip service to a consultative process, rather than to have an impact on the outcome. That is what I found with the Post Office consultation process. People were more than willing to sign petitions, turn up to public meetings, deliver leaflets, put up posters and do whatever they could, but ultimately they were not being consulted on two different options. Instead, they were being told, "This is what we would like to do. You have the opportunity to vent your frustration, but then we are going to do it anyway."

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Lady has rightly identified a problem with our democracy: people do not feel that they are being given choice. Academic studies suggest that because the parties have narrowed their differences and they all now subscribe to the neo-liberal model, people have lost interest in voting because the choice is not a real one.

Julia Goldsworthy: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point and uses another word, "choice", that has been bandied around an awful lot and has perhaps become devalued. People feel that whatever they do has no impact on the outcome. That might involve an issue relating to voting reform or purely just to the way in which our structures are set up, but the frustration goes from top to bottom in respect of how our public services are delivered.

The hon. Member for Meriden spoke of the different ways in which the Bill has been described. We prefer to call it a compost heap of proposals, with bits and bobs from many different areas. We are not even sure about the nature of the beast that has resulted. The main sources appear to be parts of the community empowerment White Paper and the sub-national review. However, the Bill is frustratingly timid, and instead of empowering people it will only add to the quangocracy that has built up over the past 10 years.

The key challenge for the Government is how they can strengthen the Bill as it passes through Parliament. There are opportunities to do so, if the Government will only accept them. I hope they will rise to the challenge and engage in a debate on all the amendments that will be tabled by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I shall give the House a potted history of how we ended up with this Bill. The first part of the Bill derives mainly from the community empowerment White Paper, published in July last year. It was clearly the Secretary of State's baby, and it is frustrating to see how much of what was essentially a best practice manual has ended up in primary legislation, and how much has been booted into the long grass. When the White Paper was announced, the most memorable proposal was that people would be entered into a prize draw to win an iPod if they turned out to vote. The hon. Member for Meriden criticised that suggestion, but it bears a striking similarity to proposals made by the leader of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron). Only the other day he said that what we needed to do to re-engage people with Parliament—as opposed to local authorities—was to put parliamentary proceedings on YouTube and to send people text updates on the progress of Bills. I hope that the hon. Lady will lead the way on this Bill and ensure that all those interested are updated on its progress by text. If we have anything like the 170 amendments that were tabled in the Lords, people's phone inboxes will be very full.

The White Paper was a best practice manual that essentially restated much of what councils do, including participatory budgeting, transferring assets to the community, spending decisions being made by area committees, and the calling in of the decision-making process. For example, in Kingston it requires only the say-so of 100 people to call in any decision made by the council—real evidence of best practice. However, it is not clear why we needed a White Paper or primary legislation. We thought the White Paper would lead to a community empowerment, housing and economic regeneration Bill, but the Government felt that that would be too unwieldy. If this Bill is a compost heap Bill, that would have been a rubbish tip Bill, and that is why we have ended up with this Bill, which retains about half the proposals in the White Paper.

The other half of the Bill comprises the remnants of a suggested draft Bill which has now been kicked as far as possible into the long grass. In March, a colleague in the other place asked when the Government intended to bring forward the community empowerment Bill. The reply was:

"Given the scope of this Session's Bill, we have decided not to publish further draft provisions on empowerment for pre-legislative scrutiny during the current Session. We will discuss with key stakeholders how best to take forward any remaining proposals where legislation may be required."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 May 2009; Vol. 710, c. WA133.]

The reply also mentioned a communities progress report on the White Paper, although I have not been able to track that down so far. Perhaps the Minister will be able to tell us when he winds up which aspects of that will need primary legislation at a later date, and which will not. I wonder whether the same test should have been applied to some of the proposals in this Bill.

Given the salami-slicing of those proposals, it is no wonder that what we are left with will not set the world on fire. For example, the first clause states that local authorities have a duty to promote understanding of their functions and democratic arrangements. There is nothing to oppose in that, and the Local Government Association describes it as "business as usual" for councils. There is nothing new in it. However, there were some important omissions from clause 1, which have now been included only because the Liberal Democrats drew attention to them in the Lords—including partnership arrangements and even parish councils. When we are talking about local democracy, it is completely mad to ignore the important first tier of local government, as those councillors probably have the closest connection with their communities. That reveals a mindset that is narrowly focused and silo-based, despite what the Secretary of State said. She said we should not be worried about which Department is responsible for some of the new organisations that are being set up or rearranged, but at the same time she was telling us that we need new structures to manage the arrangements. I do not see how we can have it both ways, and how one can say, "We can have flexibility, but we need this new overarching architecture." Even the first few clauses of the Bill open up the flaw in her argument.

Petitions are another key aspect of the Bill that leads one to think, "Well, it's all well and good but what are these measures doing in primary legislation?" We are not talking about a couple of clauses—3,000 words and 8 pages of primary legislation cover how councils should respond to petitions. I completely agree that councils need a mechanism for responding to petitions, but they need a mechanism for responding to any means by which members of the community might wish to contact their council.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. If I may return her to an earlier comment that she made, is it not the case that many petitions received by local authorities relate to issues over which, although they are consulted on them, they have no direct control? That is one of the key points. Instead, given a Bill with such a title as this one, local authorities ought to be expected to be given greater power to deliver the wishes of people in their community. They could then respond to petitions far more constructively than they can at present.

Julia Goldsworthy: My hon. Friend makes a very valuable point, which draws my attention to a specific example in my constituency. There was a debate about the transfer of upper gastrointestinal cancer surgery from the only acute hospital in Cornwall to Derriford. There were real concerns about the impact that that would have and, obviously, there was a debate about safety, and the petition that went to the overview and

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scrutiny committee contained 30,000 signatures. Of course, the council has an overview and scrutiny committee but does not make any decisions on what happens to that service. As a result, people feel massively frustrated, and not only because the petition was not acknowledged. We need a process for acting on such petitions in a way that will make a difference, rather than simply responding with a cursory acknowledgement.

Before the Government start putting forward proposals on how local authorities should deal with petitions, they should probably consider not only how the House deals with petitions, whereby they end up in a baize bag at the back of the Speaker's Chair, but how Departments deal with them. I notice that in answer to the questions tabled by my noble Friends, only the Department for International Development, the Cabinet Office and the Northern Ireland Office said that they even knew the number of petitions submitted to them in the previous year. Those that said that they did not know included the Department for Communities and Local Government. Only DFID and DEFRA publicise the petitions that they receive. Basically, once again, local authorities are leading the way while central Government Departments fall behind—yet suddenly the expert on all this is the Department that does not have a policy on how to deal with petitions.

Although some improvements were made to the Bill in the Lords—we now do not have the lengthy specification of what a valid petition is—there are clearly proposals that should not be before us at all. What strikes me is that this shows the Labour central-controlling tendency that we saw with the whole Damian McBride affair, when No. 10 Downing street attempted to control the left-wing blogosphere. In the same way, Whitehall is trying to—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) says he is very pleased that Mr. McBride can no longer control what goes on in the Labour blogosphere.

What also surprised me, looking at the progress of the Bill in the Lords, was the lack of enthusiasm among those on the Conservative Benches for tackling the issue. Again, that seems to run counter to the words they use to describe their zeal for local autonomy.

Kelvin Hopkins: It is interesting that it was the Conservatives who abolished the Greater London council and the metropolitan county councils and took away the business rate, taking it to the centre. They also sought to undermine and dismantle local authority housing provision and many other things. I do not quite believe that they are really in favour of local democracy.

Julia Goldsworthy: Actions speak louder than words for all parties, which is why I am proud of the Liberal Democrats' track record. The councils that we control are pushing as many decisions as possible down to a local level, including decisions on budgeting and spending.

It is difficult to see how the Bill's provisions on local democracy will restore people's confidence in politics and politicians. We have a weird but certainly not wonderful rag-bag.

Parts 4 to 6 of the Bill, which relate to local authority economic assessments, regional strategies and economic prosperity boards, give me grave cause for concern. I do not understand how the Government can claim the proposals are, in any way, shape or form, bottom-up—I was amazed that the Secretary of State used such language to describe them on the Floor of the House. Regional strategies will be established under the Bill by merging regional economic strategies and regional spatial strategies. However, the structure that we already have is too large and ridiculously unwieldy. The problem is not that there are two regional strategies, but that the regional level is completely inappropriate for such decision making. It is worrying that the proposals are hugely dependent on the Secretary of State, given that there will be reserved powers and the Secretary of State will have a role in specifying what goes into the single regional strategy. I worry that there will be more diktat from on high, rather than decision making at even a regional level.

Many aspects of Government policy have been reviewed in the light of the unexpected economic circumstances that we face, so I cannot for the life of me understand why Ministers refuse to say that we need to review the regional spatial strategy in such circumstances. To make the south-west regional spatial strategy stack up economically, it was based on growth of 3 per cent. a year. That does not reflect reality, and it goes to show that the proposals are completely out of touch with what is happening on the ground, let alone what people want. There is no alternative but to start again by coming forward with a process that is based on local community need, instead of the Secretary of State repeatedly imposing views that bear no relation to that need.

Mrs. Spelman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, although I am conscious that Front Benchers have absorbed quite a lot of our time. Does she accept that although local authorities were asked to set out the number of houses that they genuinely believed were needed and sustainable, a pencil was put through those figures for the regional spatial strategy and the numbers were doubled or tripled arbitrarily, which shows what is fundamentally wrong with the RSS?

Julia Goldsworthy: Yes. Having attended several Westminster Hall debates on the issue, I could bore for most parts of England about the ineffectiveness of the process. Even the process of deciding where houses are allocated bears no relation to the needs of communities. There is no way of dealing with the needs of more rural areas, where the growth of some villages might increase the sustainability of the community more than in-filling every available space in an urban area. What is even more galling in my constituency is that some of the areas for which thousands of houses are proposed were not even passed though in a car. Given that it is difficult to understand the impact of proposals when policy is set regionally, it is even more difficult to understand how the Secretary of State can increase numbers at the stroke of a pen. It would be preferable to have a radical review, get rid of the existing system, and start with a clean slate. The Bill provides an opportunity to do that, so I hope that we will be able to have a more fundamental debate.

The proposals on leaders' boards and economic prosperity boards give us an insight into the Government's concept of democratic accountability. The Government's view is that we need to replace the unaccountable,

remote and unelected regional assemblies with leaders' boards, which will be not directly accountable, just as far away and not directly elected. Basically, we are to have another top-down arrangement. The set-up will still leave smaller authorities feeling that their voice will not be heard, and we still do not really know quite how the arrangements will fit in with the Regional Select Committees, which are also supposed to provide scrutiny at a regional level.

Instead of tinkering, and rearranging the deckchairs on a regional policy that is clearly sinking, we need to look much more widely at Government policy. Questions should be posed, asking the regional development agencies to justify their existence. I do not see any reason why a lot of their powers should not be pushed down to a much lower level. I have another example, from the debate in the Lords, of how the Government seem to think that the accountability process works. It just amazed me. Baroness Andrews, who speaks for the Government, used the word "accountability" when justifying why not to push down powers. She said, in response to a question, that a "deliberate decision" was taken to set up leaders' boards and to leave the decision-making powers where they were in order to

> "preserve the current flexibility...in the RDAs' single-funding arrangements, and to keep the direct line of accountability to RDAs for the use of money voted to them by Parliament."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 December 2008; Vol. 706, c. 896.]

Most people would think that the accountability should flow from the people at the bottom, rather than from the decisions at the top. The way to get better accountability is to do anything possible to get resources and decision making closer to the people affected. Only the fag-end of a Labour Government could come up with such rhetoric in desperation.

Let me draw on my experiences of the accountability and accessibility of the regional development agencies. I get letters about once a month from my local RDA telling me how difficult its funding situation is, and how it is having to review its programmes because it is not sure that it can deliver everything that it initially thought that it could. When all of Cornwall's MPs wrote to the RDA to say that we were very worried about that, given the impact that it could have on regional funding and big regeneration projects, we did not even get an answer, let alone an offer of a date on which to meet. In terms of having open and accountable organisations, a lot of people think that the current set-up leaves an awful lot to be desired, and we Liberal Democrats will certainly make the most of any opportunity to re-open that debate that is presented by the Bill.

Exactly the same is true of the economic prosperity boards. Once again, there are the same concerns. Functions currently undertaken by locally accountable bodies are to be transferred to a new quango that individuals and businesses will have to get their heads around. It will not be closer to the people, and, again, there is no guarantee that everybody on the board will be directly elected. The Government should pay heed to the concerns of the CBI, which said that it already finds it very difficult to engage with regional bodies, and was worried about additional responsibilities being transferred to the board.

Dan Rogerson: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the current level of accountability, but there is also the question of the level of awareness. She mentions the CBI; at least it knows that such bodies exist, and roughly what their functions are. Most of my constituents do not have a clue what many of the organisations are, so to create further bodies with new titles, and new and crucial responsibilities, at a time when constituents want to know that they can go to their elected representatives and ask them to justify spending decisions, is completely ludicrous and will only make the situation worse.

Julia Goldsworthy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I have already been inundated with representations from businesses and individuals who have heard a snippet on the national news about a proposal that they think might help them, but who then find it difficult to find out what the initiative is. Once they investigate it, they usually find out that they are not eligible anyway.

Of course, the economic prosperity boards are useful as forums for debate, and if some local authorities, or groupings of local authorities, wish to participate, as the local government innovation unit pointed out, they will have the opportunity to debate the evolving city regions agenda. If that agenda is about transferring more powers and responsibilities to areas that are economically and geographically coherent, of course it is a good thing, but there needs to be consistency, because there is no Government thought process on what the rural equivalent of a city region is. I represent a series of market towns, and there is more economic coherence among the market towns in Cornwall than there would be in the area covered by the single economic strategy, which would stretch from Swindon to Gloucester and down to the Isles of Scilly. The rigidity of many of the proposals, and the fact that they are compulsory for so many authorities, will be their undoing.

Dr. Whitehead: I have a minor, modest intervention to make. Is it not the case that economic prosperity board areas seek not to be defined by city regions? They do not necessarily seek to be defined as large conurbations with a number of satellites around them, either. Instead, they can, on a voluntary basis, involve a number of authorities that wish to work together from an economic development point of view. Indeed, to refer to the hon. Lady's exact point, such authorities may have considerable coherence, even though they are not based on a city region.

Julia Goldsworthy: As I said, the economic prosperity boards could be useful forums for debate, but what worries me, looking at the number of powers that the Secretary of State reserves on the issue, is the extent to which the measures are voluntary. Instead of the Bill setting councils free, a lot of what we see in it looks like a below-the-radar move in favour of unitary authorities across the board. What we should favour is real diversity in local government structures, whether we are talking about the cabinet system, a mixture of unitary authorities or multi-tiered layers of authorities. Instead, we have top-down imposed structures, a one-size-fits-all approach and an approach that seems to want to create more quangos and more bureaucracy for everybody—and all that is being done in the name of local democracy and democratic accountability, whereas what underlies all of it is administrative convenience.

No consideration is being given to how it all looks to, or how things will work for, the person on the receiving end of the services. If the Government were serious

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about closing the accountability gap at the regional or any other level, they would have opened up the question of the allocation of resources. So much of the communities empowerment White Paper was about requiring local authorities to push down resources to the community level. There was nothing about the Government being required to push down resources to the local authority level. Let us look at other legislation that has tried to open up that question, such as the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. In that primary legislation, the Government said that local spending reports would be produced so that, for the first time, people would know not just exactly what their council spent, but what all the quangos in their area spent. That has been completely whitewashed, and proposals are being pushed further and further down the line, so that people will still find it difficult to understand what public money is being spent in their area.

As the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley said, we also need a much clearer link between the money that is raised locally and the money that is spent locally. That means a debate about how councils raise money, as well as how they spend it. That means reopening the issue of council tax. I was interested to hear what the hon. Member for Meriden had to say about revaluation, because my understanding is that the Conservative party would not abolish the council tax. As the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) said, we will be left with a Government who are looking either to revalue and continue with the council tax, or to continue with a basis for the valuation of properties that is 30 years out of date. It is just not intellectually coherent to hold that position: one either has to say, "We will support the council tax, and I'm afraid that at some point, that will mean revaluation," or one has to start looking for other systems of local government finance.

Other questions could have been dealt with in the Bill, such as localising business rates to provide people with a clearer link between the money raised and the money spent locally. There was an opportunity in the Bill to create accountability in areas where there is none, particularly at the regional level, where I am really worried that what we will have will be even more of a dog's breakfast than what we have now. We should have had options that were flexible, and that local authorities could have tailored to their needs. Those are the kind of things that would have helped to restore faith in local democracy. Instead, we have rigid, compulsory requirements. What the Government just do not get is how it all looks from the public's point of view. The Bill should be about engaging people, not "building the right architecture". None of what I have seen bodes well for the Bill, but what is of more concern for Government Members is that I do not think it bodes well for any of their wider plans, or their professed commitment to wider democratic renewal.

5.59 pm

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): May I first draw attention to my interests, as recorded in the Register of Members' Interests, and to my role as chairman of the Centre for Public Scrutiny? At the outset, I should make it clear that I welcome the Bill. I do not give it an unqualified welcome; indeed, there are some elements of the Bill by which I am not convinced, and there are some omissions from it that I regret. Despite that, the Bill contains a number of measures that will have a significant and positive impact locally, and that is certainly to be welcomed.

In their promotion of the Bill, the Government highlighted three principal sources: the Cave report of June 2007, which led to the recommendation for a tenant voice; the Councillors Commission of December 2007, which made some interesting proposals on enhancing the role of councillors and encouraging more people to stand as councillors; and the "Communities in control" White Paper of July 2008. But there is one glaring omission—the most important report published in recent years on local government, the Lyons report, published in March 2007 and so far not referred to in this debate.

The black hole into which the Lyons report has disappeared is wholly unjustified for an extremely thorough and serious review of local government. It is deeply regrettable that it has not been used by the Government as a source for sensible proposals on enhancing local democracy. The Lyons review is full of sensible and practical propositions that ought to be on the agenda. I regret the Government's failure to implement Sir Michael's recommendations, with one exception—the business rate supplement, which is being enacted as part of separate legislation that is currently in the other place. Although there is much in the Bill to be welcomed, there is a wider agenda that needs to be pursued if we are to see effective renewal of local democracy.

Turning from what is not in the Bill to its contents, part 1, chapter 1 is concerned with the promotion of public understanding of the functions of local authorities, the democratic processes and opportunities for the public to participate, and how that activity links with other local and national organisations. There has been real progress in recent years in securing better joint working between public authorities.

I look at my own local authority area and I see relations between the police and the local authority on an entirely different basis from what those of 15 years ago. I see specific initiatives, such as the violent and organised crime unit, which is jointly funded by the Metropolitan police and the local authority and which is doing extremely important work tackling some of the most serious challenges to law and order in our community. I look at the work between the local authority and the health commissioners and health providers, which is far more closely related than it was 15 years ago. We see the benefits of better joining up, and that agenda needs to be promoted and taken forward.

There is a risk, which is not in the Bill but it has been around, and the proposal has been advocated both by those on my party's Front Bench and by the official Opposition—the risk of a proliferation of separate mandates. I am pleased that our Front-Bench team has backed away from the suggestion of having directly elected police commissioners, but I note that the Opposition are still committed to it. That is a recipe for separate mandates with silo mentalities and exactly the opposite of the joining up between the local authority and other public authorities in the area, which is an important part of the agenda set out in the Bill.

Part 1, chapter 2 deals with petitions, and probably the less said about that, the better. Petitions provide one mechanism for citizens to highlight concerns, but one must question whether 11 clauses are necessary. It looks to me suspiciously like micro-management.

Andrew Mackinlay: May I invite my right hon. Friend to fast-forward to chapter 5, clause 28, on honorary titles? An absurd instrument is being put through the House of Commons that will clutter the statute book. It states that a local authority

"may spend such reasonable sum as it thinks fit for the purpose of presenting an address or a casket containing an address".

This is the kind of nonsense that the House of Commons is getting into. We do not need a new statutory provision to provide for a casket. It is absurd. Who is the architect of this? Presumably the Minister or some faceless civil servant, wasting public money putting the clause in. It must mean that all the existing caskets and addresses are illicit—illegal. It is nonsense, isn't it? I have never been a Minister and will never be one, but I would not put such crap in a Bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order.

Andrew Mackinlay: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to withdraw that—

Andrew Mackinlay: I do. What I meant to say—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is very kind of the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Raynsford: I do not disagree with much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) has said. However, I think the provision was inserted in the Bill in the other place, so he may have directed his fire at the wrong target.

Going back to petitions, we must question how it is that legislative space has been provided for a requirement that local authorities make provision for electronic petitions, when no space can apparently be found in the Bill, according to the National Association of Local Councils, for provisions to allow parish and town councils to make payments electronically. If ever there was a case for modernisation, it must surely be to end the archaic requirement that still apparently binds the 8,000 or so parish and town councils to make payments by cheque, each cheque bearing the signature of two signatories.

That was fine in 1894, when the requirement was introduced. It was probably still fine in 1972, when the legislation was last changed, but it is a bizarre anachronism in 2009. I understand that the Government were intending to revisit this in the promised community empowerment legislation, which was due to appear later this year, but as I understand that that Bill will not now be forthcoming, may I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to accept amendments in Committee to enable parish councils to make payments electronically?

Peter Luff: The right hon. Gentleman makes a characteristically powerful point, but is he aware that with only two weeks in Committee, there will be no time for additions to the Bill? We will be hard pushed to scrutinise the existing provisions, without adding to them.

Mr. Raynsford: It has been my experience over quite a few years that the Opposition make a huge fuss at the start of the Committee stage about the inadequate timetable and we then find that we end the Committee stage within the timetable agreed. I will not make any forecasts, but the particular point has merit and is straightforward. I gather the Government were sympathetic to it and intended to include it in another Bill, so I hope that it can be easily drafted, agreed and incorporated into the Bill without taking very much time from other matters.

Chapter 4 of part 1 deals with the National Tenant Voice. This is an important provision arising from the Cave review. The review led to the establishment of a new regulator for social housing, the Tenant Services Authority, which is now successfully set up, but it is not the same as providing a national voice for tenants, as highlighted by Cave. Cave recommended that the National Consumer Council might perform that role, but following consultation with tenants and existing tenant representative organisations, a clear consensus emerged on the need for an independent body. Clauses 25 and 26 provide for this. I understand that the plan is that the new body will be set up and running by the end of the year, and I hope the Minister will be able to confirm at the end of the debate that that timetable will be met.

On chapter 6, I welcome the overdue amendments to the unduly restrictive rules on politically restricted posts in local government. There is no question but that it is right to maintain the principle of political impartiality among senior officers of local authorities, but the salary-related restrictions were clearly drawing the net far too wide, and it is right that they should be amended.

Part 2 concerns scrutiny and audit functions. The extension of formal scrutiny structures to local government under the Local Government Act 2000 was an important reform and has led to significant advances in the quality and transparency of decision making in local government. However, it is probably fair to say that the impact of scrutiny across the whole local government family remains patchy. The Government's commitment in the 2008 White Paper to enhancing the powers of scrutiny bodies and raising their visibility was therefore welcome. The relevant clauses in the Bill are rather modest by comparison with those ambitious objectives, but they are nevertheless a helpful step in the right direction.

Having a designated scrutiny officer in every authority is a step forward, but it will not result in substantial advances in scrutiny if local authorities go no further. All the evidence—the Centre for Public Scrutiny monitors the issue annually—suggests that the resources available to support scrutiny functions remain limited in most authorities. If authorities are to go beyond their current level of scrutiny and ensure that it is more effective in future, the ambitions spelled out in the White Paper to raise the visibility and to enhance the resources available for scrutiny will have to be put into practice. More will be required than just the clauses in the Bill, welcome as they are.

Time does not permit me to comment on parts 3 to 6 of the Bill, but they establish the local authority boundary commission and set out new powers and responsibilities in respect of economic development and planning, which I broadly welcome.

Part 7 gives statutory backing to the important concept of multi-area agreements. The aim of MAAs is to achieve better co-ordinated activity between a number

[Mr. Raynsford]

of neighbouring authorities. I have taken a close interest in the evolution of MAAs, because of the intrinsic merit in getting authorities to work together across a wider area, and because my constituency includes one of the five Olympic boroughs—Greenwich, Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest—where work is taking place to work up a multi-area agreement. That MAA has the prospect of ensuring significant improvements across all five boroughs in the run-up to, and aftermath of, 2012; of making the most of the historic opportunity to host the Olympic games; and of ensuring that the local community as a whole secures some lasting benefits—one important legacy issue that is sometimes overlooked.

The five-borough MAA focuses on three themes that encapsulate economic, social and environmental concerns. First, there is employment—ensuring that the substantial opportunities of building the Olympic venues and hosting the 2012 events are taken in order to reduce the unacceptably high levels of unemployment and joblessness in east and south-east London. Secondly, there is housing—ensuring that the serious problems of poor housing, overcrowding and homelessness which have traditionally blighted all five boroughs are addressed more effectively. That goes far further than just the creation of an exemplary Olympic village to house the athletes in 2012; it means providing sustainable communities with homes for sale and rent after the games. Added impetus will be required throughout all five boroughs to tackle the range of housing problems from which they suffer, and I welcome the MAA's co-ordinated approach. The third theme is the public realm—recognising the importance of securing real improvements to key public areas throughout the five boroughs, given that they will be the focus of much international attention in just over three years' time.

In my constituency, there are the obvious challenges of enhancing the two key town centres of Greenwich and Woolwich and, in particular, of securing an appropriate transformation of Cutty Sark gardens. The gardens are the setting for the historic sailing ship, which is undergoing restoration, and the entry point from the river to the world heritage site and Greenwich park, one of the principal and most attractive Olympic sites. I welcome the Bill's provisions that codify arrangements for multi-area agreements, and I look forward to seeing the positive impact that an MAA can have on Olympic boroughs in east and south-east London.

Part 8 deals with construction contracts. The provisions are essentially tidying-up measures to improve the provisions that were introduced a decade ago under the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. They are none the worse for being tidying-up measures, however, and the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) was wide of the mark when she described them rather dismissively as simply inappropriate in the current economic circumstances. These matters have been discussed within the construction industry for years; they are important and necessary reforms. I regret the Opposition's churlish view towards them, given that the origin of the provisions, the 1996 Act, was introduced by a Conservative Government, with strong support from the Opposition, who in turn, when they came into government, enacted the regulations that gave effect to the powers under discussion. It was a bipartisan approach to construction industry reform, and it was based on Sir Michael Latham's report, which made some sensible recommendations for ending the unduly adversarial and litigious culture that had historically been a bugbear of the industry.

The measures that have been introduced so far have had a positive impact, and in the construction industry there are few people who would not agree with that. However, inevitably, the practical experience of the past 10 years shows the need for some fine tuning, and, over the past three years, the industry has discussed changes to the adjudication procedures and payment arrangements to try to achieve those improvements. The relevant clauses in the Bill are the product of compromise and, inevitably, do not please all parties, so we will be, and already have been, deluged with pressure for change from different parts of the construction industry. The contractors regard some of the provisions on payment as unduly prescriptive and bureaucratic; the subcontractors do not think that they go far enough. My judgment is that the measures are broadly right. They are a compromise and represent a consensus, but they seek to build on the successful reform that was introduced a decade ago, and they should help to improve the industry culture even further and ensure that the old adversarial and litigious ways are left behind.

This is an important Bill that contains a range of useful measures and deserves to progress through the House. I regret some of the omissions, but, for all that, I believe that it will bring significant benefits to several different policy areas, and I am happy to give it my support.

6.16 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests as a columnist for the *Local Government Chronicle*.

It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford). He talked about the black hole into which the Lyons report has fallen, but I think that Sir Michael himself has fallen into something fairly akin to a black hole, too, given that he is chairman of the BBC Trust. He has had a number of incarnations, and, no doubt, that is not the final one.

We lack another report today: the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government has written a rather hard-hitting report on relations between central and local government—more hard-hitting than I expected, quite frankly. It is a pity that we do not have the benefit of the advice of its members today, but there is a direct clash between this debate and a meeting of the Committee. The Government will have been aware of that, and it just shows that although we talk about joined-up government, sometimes very close parts are not joined up, so it is not surprising that the more remote parts are never joined up.

I want to step back and see, strategically, where the legislation fits with the decade-long struggle by the Government to find good answers to two related questions. First, what institutions and agencies are necessary to deliver growth and meet the needs and aspirations of a growing population at the level below national Government? In what body can we place our confidence to deliver those things—to devise some form of regional architecture,

which is the Government's preference? Secondly, what mechanisms will make the institutions on which we decide accountable? It has been a long and troubled journey, and it still has no destination in sight—perhaps because the destination does not exist. Indeed, it may be sensible to think of a different journey or agenda, because we have been going round in circles, and we are nowhere near a sensible safe haven.

The Bill represents a further attempt to answer those questions, but the Government's answer is wrong for three reasons. The most substantial reason is that, yet again, the Government have succumbed to their obsession with capacity—size matters, and they have to have scale. We saw it with the failed attempt to merge the police forces and with the mergers of the PCTs. Wherever we look, we find that the Government want bigger scale. However, we lose identity, accountability and flexibility through such measures.

The regional development agencies are to be enlarged with huge new powers, and there will be a vast regional machine, but the irony is that, in a funny old way, the Government have failed their own test. We can argue about whether the old RDAs were good, bad or indifferent—I think that they fall into all three categories—but they were never given one key instrument of economic development, which is skills. Instead, we had the Learning and Skills Council. The hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Graham Stringer), a former leader of Manchester city council, made some remarks about the LSC's expertise in budgetary control, but, given that people wanted a regional structure whose principal target was economic development, it seems ironic that an effective skills base, which every single business tells us every single day is the most important thing, was never part of the agency's remit. The LSC is, of course, disappearing and going way to a different body, so the relevant organisations will still not be brought together under one roof.

Accountability through the advisory leaders' board is also wrong. I never thought that I would see a college of cardinals raised from the ranks of local government leaders. I hope that the wonderful people selected to sit and advise have cloaks, hats and a special uniform; at one time, the Leader of the House referred to people running the quangos at regional level as hugely powerful. Such people are too remote from the citizen. The means by which a citizen can register their views—a common theme today—are suffocated by that form of bureaucracy. The leader of Leeds, Wakefield or Bradford council will not be susceptible to the individually expressed views of the citizen however many petitions or texts they receive, because the bureaucratic haze is too impenetrable for the necessary process of give and take.

The Bill fails to follow the logic of the Government's sub-regional strategy, which involves their broadly sensible steps towards creating city regions. A huge regional machine is being imposed, yet at the same time the Government are discussing the notion of the large city state, which has a lot going for it and is the one sensible thing that they have suggested. Furthermore, an enormous amount has happened without a legal framework to compel people to do what they find easier to do through voluntary agreement.

The RDAs are a mixed bag. During my ministerial career, I was dealing with City Challenge and the regeneration bodies, and I was always queasy about the intellectual validity of claims about jobs having been safeguarded or created. How on earth would that be judged? We constantly see statistics about virtuous activity. I do not care whether PricewaterhouseCoopers has done a report, because it is almost impossible to apply intellectual rigour to such statistics.

Some of the RDAs have not been too bad, although they were better at the beginning, when they were sharply focused on economic development. Since then, however, all sorts of peripheral tasks have been imposed on them—renaissance towns and the impedimenta of all sorts of mini-initiatives that have drained away their central role. There is certainly no evidence that the RDAs have narrowed regional economic disparities; in fact, there is significant evidence that such disparities have increased, as was inevitable.

I see nothing in the proposals that will make the citizen less convinced that planning is a top-down process. I am thinking especially of housing. We can all say sanctimoniously to our hearts' content that we need more houses. However, as we all know, the one thing that unites most of our citizens is their opinion that new houses are not needed in their vicinity. Any plan to build 30-odd houses as an extension to an estate or in a field, no matter how unsightly, is bound to raise protest. The citizen should feel that the process is something other than a top-down one imposed on them. Craven, in my constituency, is part of the Leeds city region structure. As part of that, it accepted a programme that would have meant a relatively modest number of houses being built annually. However, the cumulative total looked big and Craven saw the nearest thing to a citizens' revolt for a long time. The politicians responded to local pressure and backed away from the programme.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) that the Bill will push power upwards, not downwards. It will create a huge motor that will take decisions that are crucial to people's lives, and that power will be exercised by a quango—with the ornament of the advisory cardinals who will sit and give their opinions. I see the merit in the local area and multi-area agreements, which I welcome. But however virtuous they may be, we still have to accept that to a significant extent the contracting parties are themselves not directly accountable. We are building structures without direct accountability. We can praise their administrative efficiency and capacity, but we must be careful before we lend ourselves to the notion that they are genuinely accountable.

The leaders' board—this college of cardinals, this cosy coterie of local authority aldermen—will do nothing to make the citizen believe that their voice has been reinforced. We should bring back the term "alderman" for the people nominated to meet the regional development agency. I pass over the Regional Select Committees, which are largely phantom and certainly fugitive bodies, so ham-fistedly and belatedly, and with such obvious reluctance, were they introduced by the Government.

The Government will make a great deal of the bells and whistles of empowerment, such as petitions and the like. I say to Front Benchers from my party that I hope that under a future Conservative Government the citizen will not be subject to text messages on the progress of Bills. I do not wish a Government to intrude on my privacy to tell me about the progress of Government Bills, thank you very much. I am reluctant enough to text as it is, and my reluctance will be reinforced if I feel that the Government are to intrude on me by telling me about the progress of Bills, in most of which I will not

[Mr. David Curry]

have a huge residual interest. Those bells and whistles are at the margin. The central point is the accumulation and reinforcement of powers at the RDA level without effective scrutiny.

We have seen a lot of joint working, but like many colleagues I do not see why it has to have a mandatory, statutory and regulatory framework to work. When people feel the need to, they will work together. The Bill is packed full of things that would be much better left to people's common sense and willingness to work together.

The economic prosperity boards have a wonderfully Stalinist ring about them—they have overtones of a Soviet plan for tractor widget manufacture in the 1930s. If we called them "economic recovery boards", at least that would admit that we started from a point of recession rather than suggesting that we are building on unparalleled progress in prosperity. However, I am willing to be convinced. If, in Committee, good arguments are made for a statutory framework—and provided that people are to opt into it, rather than being required to become involved—I may be convinced. However, the incubus of the regional framework on top of the sub-regional strategy, to which I am attached, will be stultifying.

The dilemma at the heart of the Bill has not been mentioned, and it may be a psychological as well as a political dilemma. We all talk about devolution, localism and decentralisation, but we are often not terribly precise about what we mean by those three concepts or what the difference is between them; in fact, there is a significant difference between them. The real issue is where the balance lies between representative and direct democracy. I have heard the Secretary of State say that time has moved on from representative democracy and that we are now into direct democracy. That is a dangerous notion. Putting democracy into the hands of groups of citizens who have no responsibility beyond the subject in which they have passionate interest, who do not have to make the relevant choices and who inevitably become dependent on the Government for the stream of funding that enables them to carry on their activity, would be dangerous indeed. It is essential that we assert the clear primacy of representative institutions if our democracy is to be reinforced.

Graham Stringer: I agree with what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but is he not in danger of taking the Government's propaganda and rhetoric too seriously? There is no real direct democracy in the Bill; as the right hon. Gentleman has been saying, there is just a bit more centralisation. Is that not the case?

Mr. Curry: It may be. I occasionally make the perhaps naive mistake, after only 22 years in this place, of thinking that when the Secretary of State talks about a problem, she means to do something about it. I heard her say that the time of representative democracy was past, and direct democracy was now the thing of the future. I call for caution before we are seduced by that, because it simply is not the case. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, whose speech I agreed with almost entirely and very much enjoyed, that we have seen precious little in this regard. Everybody needs to make up their mind what they mean when they talk about localism and decentralisation. What decentralisation usually means is that the Government find a way of giving local government's functions to somebody else.

This has been a long journey. We had the directly elected assemblies, which were shot down in the north-east, then we had the regional assemblies, which remained significantly toothless and anonymous, and now we have the wonderful notion of the board of leaders. If we draw the conclusion that we are heading towards the wrong destination, perhaps we need to change train. Perhaps we should look at different sorts of structures—the structures of representative democracy—and abandon the search for a regional promised land.

In the present world, we need to do two things, one of which we all agree on and one of which some of my colleagues are very uncomfortable about. First, we need to respond to the issues that can be dealt with only on an international scale, such as climate change and population movements that may follow it, the migration of economic power to Asia, and competitiveness; we can all list what they are. We saw the G20 began to move towards a G2 of America and China. We have to ask ourselves which forum will be able to represent our interest and the European interest as regards those global issues. Frankly, that means that we will have to shift some competence and power upwards. That may be a difficult lesson to learn, but it is none the less true. If we have to do that, because otherwise we will not have the capacity to make our voices heard, then we need also to push power downwards in the areas where it is practicable to do so and the citizen can really make decisions at the local level.

The background to that is the self-empowering citizenry. I am not a computer anorak; my children will testify that that statement has the ring of truth to it. Nevertheless, the internet has empowered the citizen and disempowered institutions—the Government are the most important of those—like no other invention since the printing press, and printing was limited to a very small circle until relatively recently in modern times. The internet means that in half a day any one of my constituents can become a bigger expert on a subject—with the exception of two or three subjects that I have spent my lifetime dealing with—than I can ever be. What we might describe as the sacerdotal role of the MP as somebody sent to London because they had access to the information needed to enable them to take decisions that the citizen was not in a position to take has disappeared out of the window. The citizen can take power, mobilise and do all sorts of things that were not possible in the past, while Governments are disempowered. As a Conservative, I am in favour of the disempowerment of Governments, which is a good way forward.

Mr. Raynsford: As always, the right hon. Gentleman is making an extremely interesting and provocative speech. He talked earlier about the choice between representative democracy and direct democracy. He made very clear his preference, which I strongly support, for a system of representative democracy. In his latest example, he is essentially saying that representative democracy has had its day because citizens will use the internet to insist on a form of direct democracy. How does he reconcile those two trends and ensure the triumph of representative democracy that we agree on?

Mr. Curry: First, we must, where possible, give competence to the people who are elected, so that the citizen knows that in voting for the council there is a

choice of one set of rascals rather than the other set of rascals. If there is a competence there, the citizen is happy to make those choices. Secondly, the citizen will, in the first instance, use the internet as a tool for or against their own council, as we have all seen. We got very large quantities of e-mails about the Gurkhas because of the immediate pressure being put on the person representing those people. At the same time, people can send a fiery cross across the countryside to fight capitalism or mobilise against the G20. If we do not ensure that we safeguard representative democracy, we will allow the technology to become the servant of those who have given up on representative democracy. That is the most important thing.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Because there is now a democratic deficit as regards those who are involved in representative democracy, does my right hon. Friend agree that instead of trying to extend the franchise to 16-year-olds, we should concentrate on trying to get those who are currently qualified to vote to engage better with our democratic process?

Mr. Curry: On the whole, I subscribe to that point of view. We see disaffection in all sorts of people. The contrivance of getting people to vote in Tesco, or whatever, has demonstrated that sometimes people's determination not to vote is almost greater than people's determination to vote.

I gave way twice in the course of my peroration, which was noble beyond the call of duty, so I will now try to perorate towards the end. The Bill will, in effect, spend two weeks in Committee. Having listened to what colleagues have said and read the thing myself, it seems that almost all the amendments could be aimed at deleting significant parts of it. If we did that and left just the bells and whistles, as I have described them, it would probably become an ineffective but entirely harmless Bill, whereas if we leave the bulk of it in place, I fear that it will become yet another oppressive instrument that militates against what we are all trying to do.

6.37 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I very much agree with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) said about the missing elements in our discussion of the Bill, including Lyons and several factors that go with that. His comments meshed closely with the thoughtful, as always, contribution by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) about point at which we decide where representation should fall in local government and how we marry the notion of participation, or direct government, with representation, which is the way in which participation and its antinomies can be determined. We cannot just have the white noise of participation determining what happens, through the internet or otherwise, without a representative process that sorts out who gets what, where, how and when, and who does the thinking about that.

Equally, we cannot say that we wish to devolve power right down to the local level—that we will get rid of regional authorities and so on, and that everything will come back to local authorities—while maintaining an undifferentiated form of taxation that increasingly ends up as a flat tax. Without any ability to vary such a tax, particularly locally, it increasingly has to be determined from the centre, which necessitates making up bogus valuations in order to make any sense of how people are taxed in the first place. I understand that the Conservatives said in their green paper on local government that they would devolve power down to local level, and at the same time keep the crude version of that tax in place and freeze it for two years. Under that proposal, no one would have the opportunity to exercise any financial discretion as regards how to go about that devolution and exercise the representative government function locally. There is nothing more centralising than a tax system over which no one has any discretionary control at local level, and in which decisions on how money will be organised locally end up entirely in the hands of central Government. We are not wholly at that point yet, but if we do not do something about the issue over a period of time, we will be.

We must recognise that if we are to maintain some form of council tax or similar system, it will require modernisation, uprating and revaluation to make it function. If we do not bring that about, we will surely have condemned our local government system. Whichever direction the rhetoric about localisation is pointing, we will in fact have secured a thoroughly centralised system with very little local discretion and variation.

Mr. Swire: In my constituency of East Devon, we have about 4,500 people on the waiting list for housing, yet we have to give about £5.5 million a year from rents to central Government, which is then redistributed nationally. If those rents were given back to East Devon, we could provide the housing that we so desperately need. Surely that would be localism at its best.

Dr. Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman has perhaps anticipated some of the comments that I was going to make about the level at which various local government services fall, which the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon referred to. In an ideal world for local government, we would get it right about where services, arrangements and activities fall in the sub-national spectrum.

It is fair to say that regardless of Government, for many years we in this country have made a real pig's ear of working out where in sub-national government things should be dealt with. The truth of the matter is that local government, as we call it, is not just a number of local authorities, the boundaries of which have been determined by the local government boundary committee or, in the case of county councils, largely by the Plantagenets. Since the county boundaries were put in place, the black death and the industrial revolution have been and gone, and local government has come into its modern form. Aldermen have come and gone, and still we have counties based on the local government boundaries of 1383 or similar.

The reality of sub-national government and what people want from their local services is that those services work at different levels of sub-national determination. Sometimes they work within the local government boundaries as they are now, and those boundaries themselves appear to be rather centralising in the case of some services. Sometimes what we call local government services fall at neighbourhood level and sometimes into local government areas as we have currently decided them. Sometimes they fall at sub-regional level and sometimes at regional level.

[Dr. Whitehead]

The issue to consider is not just the level at which services fall but at what point they should be accountable. Should we determine that at each level of sub-national services, there should be complete representative accountability for them? I have personally considered for a long time that a number of services and functions properly fall at regional level. The question is whether we have got the delineation of the regions right. I believe that the regions of England are based on those originally devised by a Conservative Prime Minister to relate to regional development in the European Union, after which they were declared to be "the regions". The idea that democracy might conceivably be based on those regions is perhaps a problem for regional development.

Peter Luff: My understanding, from evidence that my Select Committee received during its consideration of the Bill, is that the regions have their origin in civil defence maps of the second world war. That cannot be the proper basis, particularly in a strange area such as the east, for economic and rent policies in the 21st century.

Dr. Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman's journey of discovery goes back even further in history than my journey of understanding about how the regions of England, as they have been defined for a while, arose. Certainly the regions as we see them now were put into place as a response to what Brussels had to say about regional development in member states. They have solidified into the regions upon which democracy might conceivably be based.

My point is that whether or not one decides that one would have started out with those regional boundaries, there is a strong case for the functions that fall at regional level—the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon pointed to other functions that increasingly fall above national level, given the problems in the world—to have a democratic mandate related to them. A number of regional quangos have fallen outside the ambit of regional development agencies and the soon to be departed indirect regional assemblies. They could fruitfully be brought within the ambit of a directly elected regional tier of government.

There are further tiers of government. From a neighbourhood point of view, the district or unitary authority often looks distant, so our ideal is to devolve from that tier of local government to another tier, or to a neighbourhood administration that is appropriate for certain functions.

Mr. Swire: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying, and we are going through this argument at the moment in my own county of Devon. Among some people there is a desire to have unitary government and others, such as me, desire to retain the two-tier system, which serves us well with enhanced working. Although I agree that some things need to be done at a sub-regional level and others at a supranational level, surely the logical conclusion of what the hon. Gentleman says is that the best local democracy comes from retaining our district councils. They must surely be the most immediately accountable bodies available to local people.

Dr. Whitehead: The conclusion that I was going to reach in my description of the journey of sub-national government in this country was to agree substantially with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon that there is probably no exactly right formulation. Certainly district authorities perform a good function and provide good services in a number of circumstances.

I personally consider, certainly as far as the south of England is concerned, that the tier of local government that is potentially substantially redundant, if services fall at the proper level, is county councils. Other than the fact that a lot of people would be very upset for historical reasons, we could quite happily do without that tier in our local government dealings. When considering what should fall at what level of sub-national government, we would not seriously miss many things that have resided at county council level.

That brings me to some of the purposes of the Bill. I do not want to go through all the clauses because this is a Second Reading debate and we should examine whether the measure merits further consideration. I think that it does, because although it is by no means an overall solution to the problem of representation and where local government falls, it attempts to make clearer some reasonable working mechanisms for how specific local government functions fall, without necessarily leading us down the path of choice. It allows us to consider whether we need a representative level at every stage, and whether devices exist whereby we can ensure accountability, albeit indirect accountability. It also allows us to consider arrangements for local authorities, which are statutorily defined, to work together voluntarily to ensure that the functions that fall beyond them can be tackled and represented adequately.

A little example that springs to mind is local government working between Southampton, the area that I represent, and South Hampshire. Several clear local government functions go beyond the boundaries of Southampton. Yet, as things stand, we have a choice between their residing with the county council or the city's attempting to lead the functions, with several other authorities, which may be more or less reluctant to have such leadership thrust upon them. Economic development and a range of other matters that relate to the sub-regional economic dimension clearly go beyond the local government boundaries of Southampton. They include transport, planning and housing as well as economic development considerations. Yet if one approached authorities outside Southampton and asked whether they wished to be ruled by Southampton for those functions, they would probably say no.

A much better way of ensuring that those functions are adequately covered is through co-operation between the authorities. That ensures accountability, and that the functions work at the right level in the sub-region and to the benefit of all the authorities in the area. That is beginning to happen with the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire, which was one of the first seven multiple area agreements to be signed last year. The authorities are of all parties and none—not one is currently a majority Labour authority; some are Conservative, some have no overall control and some are Liberal Democrat—but they increasingly work well together.

I agree about the Enver Hoxha-ist resonance of "economic prosperity areas"; the best appellation might be the subject of consideration in Committee. However,

in practice, authorities that work as I described want a loose framework and arrangement for what they do and an understanding that they are there for the medium and long term—there is no foot-in, foot-out, "There one week, gone the next" attitude. They want a longish-term arrangement in which they can work together; a statutory recognition that they are working together; and the ability to build on that to increase function, finance and resource as the arrangement develops. That is a genuinely important step forward in the Bill. It provides a framework on a voluntary basis—no one has to do it and it does not rely simply on city regions: top-tier and lower-tier authorities can combine and a range of different arrangements can apply. The central arrangement is catching activities that go wider than one local authority.

The arrangement goes some way towards solving the region, sub-region, local dilemma and how we develop services. It begins to catch services at the right level and make them increasingly accountable. As the idea develops, I look forward to more functions coming under the scope of those arrangements from the top down rather than from the bottom up. However, as one of the Bill's central themes, it has a great deal to commend it. For that reason alone, if not many others, I am ' appy to support this Second Reading.

6.55 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests.

It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), and, indeed, a series of deeply thoughtful speeches, all of which expressed some concerns about whether the Bill will remedy the disparity between local authorities' responsibilities and their accountability to the electorate, and whether it will accentuate rather than alleviate that division.

I begin by considering a narrower issue and by taking it for granted that the Bill's three key objectives—promoting local democracy, encouraging co-operation between local authorities and facilitating regional planning—are a good thing. I want to draw attention to a phenomenon, which, if the measure does not tackle it, could undermine all three objectives. It is the increasing exploitation of a little known loophole, which allows one council to meet its housing targets by building houses in another local authority's area. That threatens the first objective, since local democracy cannot properly operate without local accountability. If one council can meet its Government targets at the expense of the interests of residents in another area, to whom it is not accountable electorally, that is the antithesis of local democracy.

The loophole undermines the second objective—promoting co-operation through leaders' boards and economic prosperity boards—because it is hard to envisage how local authorities will co-operate if one or more decide that they can meet their goals by invading their neighbours. That is a recipe for lack of co-operation rather than for facilitating it.

The same is true of facilitating regional planning and meeting housing targets, which are regional planning's principal objective, if, once those targets are sub-aggregated to individual regions, houses are not built in areas where local authorities were told that there was a need and a duty to build them, but in someone else's area—possibly even outside the region.

Colleagues may not know—I did not until comparatively recently—that it is legally possible for one council to try to meet its housing targets by seeking planning permission to build in another local authority area. They may think that, even if it is legally possible, it does not happen in practice.

Kelvin Hopkins *rose—*

Mr. Lilley: I will certainly give way to the hon. Gentleman because his council is one of the guilty parties.

Kelvin Hopkins: I understand precisely what the right hon. Gentleman is talking about in our locality. However, would it not be sensible when, for example, a large town needed to expand to accommodate its population, for the land to become part of the expanding authority—for a transfer of territory to take place from one authority to another? That seems the most sensible way forward.

Mr. Lilley: That would mean even more ambitious plans to invade and take over local authorities.

Mr. Garnier: I sympathise with my right hon. Friend's point, even more so now that I have heard what the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) has just said. My constituency goes up to the city boundary of Leicester, but Leicester city council would like to expand its authority into the suburban area of my largely rural constituency, in a borough called Oadby and Wigston. The city council does not want the area to build houses in, but it would like to get hold of its council tax base.

Mr. Lilley: That would probably add to the incentive. I have enormous admiration for the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), but we need to think hard about the consequences of what he has suggested. If an authority was told by the Government, rightly or wrongly, through their regional planning policy, that it needed to build a certain number of houses in its area and if the neighbouring authority needed to build another number of houses in its area, it would be wrong for the first authority to be able to say, "Well, we'll build that number of houses, but not in our area. We'll build them in someone else's." Wherever the borders ought to lie, such matters should be decided quite separately.

As will become obvious to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a recent example of the problem is that the local authorities in Luton and South Bedfordshire decided to try to meet their housing targets by making an area in the neighbouring district of North Hertfordshire one of their preferred locations for house building. The area that Luton and South Bedfordshire have chosen was not included in the original Milton Keynes and south midlands spatial strategy, so no one in North Herts was consulted while the strategy was going through. The area in question was not even one of Luton and South Bedfordshire's preferred options when they were considering how to meet that broad strategy, once it had been decided. It was only when it suddenly dawned on local councillors in Luton and South Bedfordshire that there would be some opposition—there is always some opposition—to building where they had originally thought it would be sensible and right to build, and that they could avoid that opposition, in electoral terms, by transferring their ambitions to a neighbouring area, that they went ahead with the proposal.

[Mr. Lilley]

Luton and South Bedfordshire have selected the area of Lilley Bottom, as it is known, near the eponymous village of Lilley in my constituency. Not many hon. Members have villages in their constituencies that are named after them, still less parts of their anatomies—or after which they are named—but there we are. The area is a particularly beautiful part of my constituency and probably one of the most attractive valleys in the constituency, which makes it even more abhorrent to those who live there that it has been seized upon in this way. The area provides a vital resource to the inhabitants of Luton, South, who have a beautiful area of countryside on their boundaries, which they greatly want and, by and large, want to keep. Should the plan go ahead, there would be a double loss, for the inhabitants of both North Herts and Luton.

It is not only that area that is affected, however. There is another area where a neighbouring local authority is planning to build, in St. Albans, in the southern part of my constituency, although that plan has recently been stopped. My point is that although the problem may not be common throughout the country, if we do not stop it, we will open the floodgates. There will not be a council in the country with housing pressures in its area that will not think, "How much more preferable to seek planning permission in another area." I do not know whether there is even any limit on councils choosing areas in entirely different parts of the country. Could the inhabitants of Kent seek to meet their housing targets by building in Northumbria? As the law is currently phrased, I think they could. That is an absurdity. We should take the opportunity provided by this Bill to close that loophole and ensure that local authorities try to meet their targets in their areas and for their constituents, to whom they are responsible.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again. The problem arises where there is no possibility of accommodating those who need housing within the boundaries of the authority in question, which is certainly the situation in Luton. Perhaps 1,000 more houses might be built in in-fill, but we need much more than that, with 8,500 people on the housing transfer and waiting list. The problem is uncomfortable, but it has arisen from necessity, not perversity.

Mr. Lilley: I hate to tell the hon. Gentleman about his own constituency, but his constituents—his councillors—first identified sites in various parts of Luton and neighbouring areas that were sufficient for housing targets. In my view those areas are quite sensible places to build, but it is up to those councillors. It was only when there was a degree of opposition from some locals in those areas that the councillors thought, "Let's put the houses in someone else's area where it doesn't matter if there's opposition, because they can't vote against us as they're not in our constituency." There are plenty of areas in the Milton Keynes-to-Luton region, which is what the target covers, where building could be undertaken, without going into another county.

There has recently been a welcome High Court decision that, at first sight, has a bearing on the issue. Hertfordshire county council and St. Albans district council took the eastern area regional plan to the High Court and won, which is the first time that a regional housing plan has, to a degree, been overturned by the High Court. The decision affected both the proposal for Dacorum to spread beyond its boundaries into land owned by St. Albans—the land is the other side of the motorway, so most people do not realise that it is owned by St. Albans—and building work in Welwyn and Hatfield. Knowing that I was going to raise the issue today, my local newspaper, the *Herts Advertiser*, made the helpful suggestion that we could rely on the court case to achieve what I want to achieve through parliamentary measures. Unfortunately, my understanding is that we cannot do so, although I look forward to a response from the Minister if I am wrong and if the case has indeed solved the problem.

My understanding is that the court said that the east of England plan was wrong because of a failure to carry out a proper strategic environmental assessment of urbanising the belt between Dacorum, St. Albans and Welwyn and Hatfield, and the fact that they would begin to merge into each other if building took place. The decision was not based on a rejection of the right of one council to build outside its own area. I therefore hope that, in summing up, the Minister will correct me if I am wrong. Indeed, I would be delighted if I were wrong and if the case means that the threat from Luton and South Bedfordshire in North Hertfordshire has disappeared.

I hope that the Bill will be amended to close that loophole; otherwise, the Bill's very objectives will be threatened. I am concerned that it has emerged that the Committee stage of the Bill will be so brief as to inhibit the time to amend it appropriately and close that loophole. I know that the Minister cannot give me a commitment today to table specific amendments, but I would ask him to give a commitment in summing up at least to give serious consideration to introducing an appropriate amendment in Committee. Unless he does so speedily, the opportunity for the House to do its job and amend the Bill to improve it will be lost. I hope very much to hear from the Minister at the end of this debate that he will do that.

I shall briefly make some broader points. The Bill purports to promote local democracy. How does it do that? It does so by telling local authorities what they must do and how they must do it, and then monitoring them and sanctioning them if they do not do it. What is the cost? What are the resources? What is the time frame? How many extra officials will need to be employed to ensure that authorities are meeting the 3,000 words of obligations imposed on them? What resources will be made available from central Government to enable those officials to do those things? If they are already doing them, no extra resources will be required, but then no extra legislation will be needed. The presumption must be that many officials are not doing those things and that extra resources will therefore be required.

At a time of economic crisis, the one thing we ought not to be doing is adding to the enormous deficit that this country faces, which exceeds the entire budget of the Department, as well as the budgets of the defence system and the education system. I cannot believe that we are going to add to it, albeit in small ways, by imposing extra obligations, which will require extra resources, on local authorities. This is a sign that the Government have no idea of the scale of the crisis that

we face, not just this year but for years to come. If we are to bring total public expenditure back into line with the taxable resources of this country, why are they seeking to place on local government additional costly obligations that no one in the Chamber has so far suggested are necessary? Nor have I heard any call from outside the Chamber for these duties to promote this, that and the other.

The second thing that the Bill does is to promote local government by transferring power away from elected and partly elected bodies. It moves power from regional bodies—which are pretty bad, but at least they contain some indirectly elected members—to leaders' boards. We are not told what the composition of the leaders' boards will be. The presumption is that they will consist of the leaders of the local authorities, although that is not spelled out in the Bill. They could consist of the chief executives of the local authorities—or their wives and girlfriends, or husbands and boyfriends. The composition is not spelled out; we are simply told that a board will be established and that it will be called a leaders' board. One thing that we know is that people will not be directly elected to the leaders' boards. The boards will have a constitution and duties imposed on them by the Government. In practice, they will be supervised and monitored by the Government, and they will be dissolved if the Government do not like them. This seems to be going in exactly the wrong direction.

I would like a Bill that genuinely lived up to its title, and that promoted local democracy, economic development and the construction of houses in the right places, but I fear this Bill will not do that. Unless it is modified, it will be undermined by the growing exploitation of a loophole that threatens all its key objectives. It promotes additional burdens on local authorities—and, ultimately, on the local taxpayer—for which there is no demand and no need, and it removes power from the people to central Government and to unelected bodies in a wholly undesirable way, for which the House has so far shown no support.

7.13 pm

Keith Hill (Streatham) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) ended his speech with a number of wide-ranging considerations that were in line with the thoughtful, even philosophical, tone of many of the contributions that we have heard this evening. He began, however, by expressing a number of highly specific and—as he said himself—narrow concerns. In so doing, he has paved the way for the contribution that I wish to make to the debate. I wish to raise a narrow but important issue about part 5 of the Bill, which deals with the duties and powers of county councils in relation to the economic and spatial planning role of the so-called responsible regional authorities—that is to say, the regional development agency and the leaders' boards drawn from local authorities in the region.

Let me remind the House that under the current legislation—the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004—there is a duty on the responsible planning body when drawing up the regional strategy to seek the advice of county councils in two-tier areas, and elsewhere of unitary authorities, national park authorities or the Broads authority. There is a reciprocal duty on those authorities to give advice. Further provisions relate to the key role of upper-tier authorities in drawing up sub-regional plans. Those reciprocal roles and duties will be removed by the Bill, and I think that that is wrong. I wish to argue for the inclusion of those roles and duties in the Bill.

I ought perhaps to explain my interest in the matter. It so happens that, five years ago, almost to the day, as the nation's then Planning Minister, I had the doubtful pleasure of piloting through this House the final stages of the aforementioned Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act. I call it a doubtful pleasure because certain clauses concerning the role of county and unitary councils—the so-called section 4(4) authorities—were the subject of a somewhat acrimonious dispute between this House and the other place. That dispute led to my—I confess it—highly reluctant, even churlish, acceptance of amendments to strengthen the role and duties of the upper-tier authorities. Those amendments went further than I thought strictly necessary at the time, but they were needed to secure closure on the legislation for the benefit of all concerned in the planning system.

I said at that time that I looked to local government, and to the county councils network in particular, to ensure that the arrangements worked and to engage constructively in the regional planning process. Indeed, I put it on record that if the arrangements that we were agreeing to through those amendments proved unworkable because of a lack of good will from the parties concerned, we would come back and amend the law.

I raise this point about the debates on the 2004 Act because I now want to put it on record that, despite my earlier scepticism, I believe that the section 4(4) authorities on the whole have made their best efforts to ensure that the current arrangements for regional and sub-regional planning succeed. My scepticism about the intentions of those authorities was misplaced. In other words, I was wrong. It is not often that one hears a politician say that, at least about a policy decision. I am therefore very surprised that the Bill, if enacted in its present form, would remove from primary legislation the regional and sub-regional planning roles of those section 4(4) authorities.

Mr. Garnier: The right hon. Gentleman might think that this is a rather impertinent intervention. He has said that, as a Minister, he at least thought about the legislation that was being enacted. One problem that concerns me about this Bill and so many others is that Ministers bring them to the House apparently without having thought about their contents or their implications. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on thinking about the Bill with which he was concerned. He might well have changed his mind since; that does not matter—at least he applied his mind to it.

Keith Hill: I hear the hon. and learned Gentleman, but I would not for a moment accuse my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench of presenting this Bill without having given it the most serious thought and consideration. I am sure that that applies to all the Ministers we have seen here today, including the Secretary of State, and not least to the Minister for Local Government, who will respond to the debate and to whom I am determined to offer the greatest possible blandishments in the course of my remarks.

Kelvin Hopkins: I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could explain further his conversion. The earlier legislation placed a restriction on shire counties, perhaps to prevent urban unitaries from expanding, and he now seems to think that that legislation was right, even though he did not do so at the time. This matter is obviously of concern to me, as I represent an urban unitary authority that wants to expand into a shire county.

Keith Hill: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I have misled him. It was certainly not the purpose of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, so well remembered by the House, to exercise any discrimination or to make a judgment about the relative merits of county councils or unitary authorities. As I shall explain, the changes to the present Bill that I am now proposing are designed to benefit county councils and unitary authorities equally.

This is an important issue for local government, and I know that the County Councils Network has spelled out its concerns to the Government on more than one occasion. As the House will be aware, the County Councils Network is a cross-party body and its concerns are shared by its membership across all three major parties, so I hope that the Government will give far more weight to its views than they have been prepared to do so far.

The truth is that the present statutory arrangements have worked pretty well up to now and it makes eminent sense to retain a statutory role for county councils in the two-tier areas. They provide much of the infrastructure needed to implement spatial plans—for example, schools and local transport—and they also have a key role in ensuring coherence with other public sector agencies such as policing and health that are organised on a sub-regional basis.

Let us be clear that this is not only about appropriate roles, as it is also about resources. In two-tier areas, much of the technical support to regional assemblies on regional planning is provided by county councils, which also have a key responsibility for sub-regional planning. This resource is vital to ensuring sub-regional differentiation within the regional strategy. I put it on the record for the benefit of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay), who protested about such phraseology, that what that means is different provision in different parts of the region. These councils also have a vital role in supporting the development of the regional strategy itself. Let us be clear once again that regional teams are not resourced to undertake this work and they would lack the detailed sub-regional and local knowledge to make such planning effective.

The section 4(4) role is essential in order to retain capacity and expertise in strategic planning, including the research and intelligence functions, which provide a key evidence base for the regional and sub-regional planning process. I put it to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government that we are in the paradoxical position whereby the upper-tier authorities want to ensure a continuing and strong statutory foundation for them to undertake work in support of the regional development agencies, while the Government are putting at risk the provision of that resource by removing the existing statutory duties through the Bill. It is a risk. Who can be at all confident that in the absence of a duty written directly into the Bill, these functions will be preserved by local authorities under pressure to cut costs?

I think I understand what my Front-Bench colleagues will say in defence of the Government's position. I have, of course, read the remarks of my noble Friend the Under-Secretary—both in Committee and on Third Reading in the other place—and I have read the letter sent by the Minister for Local Government to the county councils network management committee on 21 May. In general terms, Ministers have offered the assurance that these roles and duties will be set out in guidance and regulation. Indeed, my noble Friend the Under-Secretary—an excellent Minister, by the way—went so far as to say that the counties will have a number of "clear statutory roles". Those roles are arguably—one would have to see the detail—close to the status quo. If that is the case, let me say to my right hon. Friends: why go through the time-consuming trouble of laying separate regulations before the House? Why not restore directly in the Bill the roles and duties set out in the 2004 Act, which I do not believe would be a contentious proposal?

It may be that the reluctance to include these detailed provisions on the face of the Bill is defended in the name of local democracy. In other words, it may be argued that the regional leaders' boards should be allowed to draw up their own schemes, but what if such a scheme omitted a proper role for the upper-tier authorities? That would not be very democratic, would it? Indeed, would it not be likely to attract the centralising intervention of the Secretary of State in order to ensure appropriate roles and duties for these authorities? If such roles and duties are to be anticipated—or, indeed, in the words of my noble Friend the Under-Secretary, to enjoy statutory status—why not save a lot of trouble, why not spare the county councils the uncertainty and why not restore these roles and duties directly in the Bill? The relegation of the county and unitary councils' role to as yet unspecified regulations and advice notes seems to me to be both pointless and harmful.

Now the Minister for Local Government knows that my position is not a veiled attack on the need for regional planning of the economy, housing, transport and the environment—I leave that to the Conservative Opposition, whose policies are in my view a prescription for nimbyism, and I believe that there would be only a minimal level of house building under a Conservative Administration. On the contrary, I want to see strong regional and sub-regional planning, owned by as many as possible of the key players. I thus conclude by asking my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government to consider having further discussions with the County Councils Network with a view to rethinking this part of the Bill.

7.26 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I just wish that the right hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) had stopped a little earlier, as all my friends in my county and district councils would have been very pleased with much of what he had to say. I hope that his speech will elicit a positive response from those sitting a few Benches in front of him.

This Second Reading debate has been quite curious. The debate has been pretty severely crippled by comments on the Bill's inadequacy and questions about why it

should be here—I exempt, of course, the Secretary of State. Much of the debate has been on what could and should have been, but is not, in the Bill.

I thought that the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), particularly what he said at the beginning and end of his speech, were most apposite. He pointed out that the Select Committee, of which I am a member, has just produced a report. It is interesting to think of the Government ploughing the Bill through—to the detriment, I believe, of local government—while answering the Select Committee's recommendations for local government to have more powers devolved down to it. His last point, which was interesting and intriguing, was that the Committee stage would be very much shorter if a lot of the irrelevant stuff had been taken out of the Bill and if the Bill had been pared down to two or three of the Government's most important points. On that basis, the Committee stage might be dealt with in about a week.

My first reaction to the Bill was, like that of many others, why is it here and what is it going to do? Perhaps the Secretary of State explained that with her mantra, "places a duty", which she kept saying. Yet again, local government will be loaded with more and more duties and costs. Most competent local authorities are already doing much of what is in the Bill, so one wonders whether it was concocted and put together by Ministers who looked at local government and its co-operation with local communities and themselves and decided that because it is working quite well and to the benefit of local communities, they would legislate and put in yet more Government restrictions and more duties.

When I asked the chief executive and the leader of a big unitary authority for their first reaction, they both pointed out that if the Bill had to exist, it should be revised to take away many of the plans that local authorities were currently required to produce by the Government. I am adding to some of the thoughts already expressed about what should be in the Bill, but with a slightly different slant. Their authority, like many local authorities, is overloaded with reviews and requirements for plans, checks and so forth.

That particular local authority—a unitary authority—estimates that the Government require approximately 80 major reviews and plans regularly from it. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) is not in his place. When he was Minister for Local Government, he genuinely promised dramatically to reduce, and perhaps even to halve, the number of plans and reviews that this local authority, among others, had to produce for the Government. I understand that nominally there has been—or was at that stage—a large reduction in the overall number of plans. However, since then, more have been added and where there were two plans, they have often been combined into one or one has been made a sub-plan to another. In effect, then, there are more plans and more reviews than there were when the then Minister for Local Government asked for reductions.

Most of those plans and reviews require the input and expertise of senior local government officials, who must produce detailed plans, often with ludicrous parameters. Let me give just one example. Local authorities with an influence on housing have been required to present a 30-year housing plan. Given that the Treasury seems to be unable to predict year on year—especially at the moment—the idea that local authorities could spend time and money guessing 30 years ahead with any reliability overstretches the imagination.

It is hard to get to grips with this vague Bill. Some of the plans have the distinct appearance of old-fashioned, socialist "great leaps forward". It is a mongrel Bill. Apparently it is partly about "economic development", but, flicking through it, I failed to find any link to, for example, the business community. If we must have all these quangos and boards, which I severely doubt, it is critical for the business community to have a strong input on policy that affects economic development. After all, even under this Government the private sector must have the biggest role in generating wealth in any locality. As I have said, the Bill reeks of the Government's desire to produce old-time socialist plans, and one waits for the phrase "great leap forward" to appear.

Many of the proposed changes, especially those involving local authorities directly, are best left for local authorities to make without rules, without regulations, and without Government overview. That haVE been the theme of many of the speeches that we have heard today, and of one key, noisy, slightly long and emphatic intervention from the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay). I found his intervention intriguing, because we had discussions in the past when he was a union leader.

Given that English local authorities have probably accepted petitions for more than 100 years, we should pay attention to chapter 2 of the Bill, which deals with petitions to authorities. Over time they have responded to various kinds of petition, and have responded more emphatically and effectively. Petitions are received in many forms—some are received electronically. Currently authorities acknowledge and respond to all of them, with the possible exception of the utterly ridiculous. I remember a few of those. I am tempted to suspect, however, that even the utterly ridiculous receive a formal response after consideration.

The Bill contains a clause entitled "Democratic arrangements of principal local authorities". How can the Secretary of State possibly think that local authorities do not promote democracy and explain the roles of councillors, how to become a councillor, the support available to councillors to assist them in their role, how to approach councillors, and when their meetings and surgeries take place? That is common practice. It is done by all local authorities, and there is no need for legislation. Local authorities and indeed councillors, political or otherwise, naturally try to persuade other competent individuals, in particular, to become councillors and to take part on the democratic process. We do not need this legislation.

Let me take up a similar theme. I am astonished that the Government feel the need to dictate to local authorities that senior officers are liable to be called to account. Local authority meetings are almost always—indeed, perhaps without exception—held in public. The appropriate senior officers are present, and they are held to account by the elected councillors. That arrangement has been the norm for decades, and it has been developed as local authorities have adopted more openness. I find it amazing that the Government require the central diktat that runs through the Bill and, perhaps even worse, will run through the secondary legislation that follows it.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

Perhaps the biggest opportunity that has been lost is the chance to return RDA functions to local authorities. The system worked very well before. The responsibility should be left to elected authorities, even if they work in groups—perhaps not dissimilar to the leaders' board, but without the need for legislative diktat.

The Bill talks of—yet again—reviews, of further examination in public, of what is to be reviewed, and of even more approval of revision by the Secretary of State, who, of course, has reserved powers to revise and make further regulations. The same seems to apply to the economic prosperity boards: there are constitutions, rules and regulations on membership and voting, costs to be met by constituent councils and still further reviews of the boards and the various schemes. As I observed earlier, the business community does not seem to be involved.

In the middle of this hotch-potch of a Bill is clause 29, which has not been mentioned so far. It removes the restriction on senior local authority employees undertaking political activities such as standing for election or speaking publicly in support of a particular political party. I believe that that restriction has worked well in the past. I understand from senior local authority officials—local government officers—that it has strengthened their impartiality and standing and has actually given them more authority. Although clause 29 is small, I think that we shall come to regret that retrograde step.

I believe that most tenants—certainly those whom I know on many of the estates that I have visited—will be bemused to find that yet another new national body is being set up supposedly on their behalf. It is likely to be no more than a remote talking shop at taxpayers', or perhaps tenants', expense.

I have flicked through a few of my concerns about a Bill which proclaims that it sets out to increase local democracy but which will, in my view—like all the Government's local democracy Bills—do exactly the opposite. I remain absolutely opposed to it.

7.36 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): Because I agree with a great deal of what many Members have said, I will not repeat it but will try to have my own take on the Bill. I must, however, comment on what was said by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who, although his constituency is not contiguous with mine, is a near neighbour. I think of Bedfordshire as well as Hertfordshire, because the expansion might take place there, too.

I believe that urban local authorities that run out of land for house building and that have house building needs should be able to expand around their borders, and I believe that conurbations present the most efficient way for human beings to live. We do not want to see strings of houses and little settlements scattered across the countryside; it is much better for them to be situated around large towns. Sometimes towns have to expand.

Martin Horwood: The hon. Gentleman seems to be advocating the policy of urban extension that has been a feature of regional spatial strategies. Does he think that such policies should be pursued, even if every community and elected representative at every level, from parish council to European Parliament, opposes them?

Kelvin Hopkins: Obviously each case should be viewed on its merits, but something must be done to help people who desperately need housing and cannot be rehoused because there is no available land or housing in their local authority area. We need sensitive extension of urban boundaries that takes account of the need for some green belt or green wedges. It should also be borne in mind that cities and towns over a certain size—with a critical mass—are more capable of providing better services because they have more resources.

A town the size of Luton, with a population of nearly 200,000, is less able to provide services than larger places, such as Nottingham or Leicester. Light rail systems, for example, are not viable in towns with populations below about 400,000. It would be difficult to argue the case for a light rail system in Luton. I think that light rail systems are very attractive, and I would like to see one in Luton, but unfortunately we do not appear to have the necessary critical mass. However, we must find some way of housing people. Ideally, we would have slightly smaller populations, in which case we would not have the problem of housing crowding.

My constituency has the youngest age structure of any in the country; it has more children at school than any other constituency. Those children will grow up, they will want to be housed and they will want somewhere to live that is close to where their families live, so we will need more houses. I understand the concerns of those who represent the areas bordering big cities and big towns such as Luton, but we have to do something about housing.

When it comes to local democracy, we have lost a great deal. Local authorities used to have responsibility for business rates; many more powers over raising local finance; large historical equity in local authority housing, which they could use to build more houses and provide housing at reasonable rents for local people; and so many direct services that have now been outsourced or put into trusts. That was a much better way of organising things.

I also regret the move from committee systems to the cabinet and back bencher arrangements that now exist. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) about that, although I would not put my case in quite such a robust way—he has his characteristic, charismatic way of speaking, which I would like to emulate but am unable to. I know councillors who now sit as back benchers and are not cabinet members or portfolio holders. They sometimes think, "What am I doing here?"

I was also astonished to find—I obviously voted for the legislation without realising what I was doing—that a decision made by the whole council can be overturned by the cabinet. I know that because it has happened twice in Luton. The council, which was Liberal Democrat and Conservative-controlled for a period—only just; it is now Labour-controlled—made a decision about school travel with a one or two vote majority, but the cabinet, which was controlled by the Liberal Democrats and one or two Conservative members, overturned the decision twice. I find it astonishing that a legislature could be overturned by an executive, but that happened and it is

profoundly undemocratic. I would like to see much greater involvement of back benchers, the traditional system of committees with strong chairs, a great deal of openness and the full discussion, in party groups, of all policies. That used to happen in my time as a councillor. Sometimes the meetings would last five or six hours, but every detail of policy was discussed, voted upon by all members and taken to the council. That was a much more democratic way of carrying on.

I do not think that it has been desirable that government has tried to force local authorities to get rid of their local authority housing, via arm's length management organisations or privatisation, as has happened in some cases, and handing over to housing associations. Council housing was a tremendous success for perhaps a century or so, and the best council housing—much of my constituency's has been sold off—was built during that time. Millions of people grew up in good homes, with comfortable gardens and all the usual facilities one should expect in council housing, because of successive Governments, Conservative as well as Labour. That has been lost and I want to see it restored.

Sir Paul Beresford: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the finances that one would think local authorities would keep—the capital receipts—are taken away too?

Kelvin Hopkins: Indeed, I would like capital receipts and, indeed, business rates and the borrowing powers that local authorities used to have, to be handed back to local authorities. I would like them to have the degree of independence that they had in the past. That was largely taken away by Conservative Governments, but the approach has been continued by Labour Governments ever since. I do not wish to look back to a golden age, but at times in the 1970s we did wonderful things with our local authorities; we built regional sports centres, swimming pools and thousands of houses—we housed a complete waiting list. We did great things, and they were decided at the local level. Of course, this was counter-cyclical and helped to keep people employed too. That is the sort of local government that I want.

Recently, some of our Ministers have talked about reviving or reinvigorating pluralism, which is a system of democracy whereby there are different centres of power. It is not just centred in government, because there is also strong local government, strong trade unions, a strong legislature balancing the Executive, lobbying, business representation and so on. Those different centres of power rub against each other and ensure that power does not become over-centralised in government and at the highest levels of government, as has been the case in Britain in recent years. I strongly believe that we must restore local democracy, much more independence for trade unions and a strong, independent and non-politicised civil service. All those things were valuable parts of our democracy, and I want them to be rebuilt in the future.

In a sense, those things were not what I came here to talk about. I wished to make some points that might appear rather trivial, but are none the less important. The Bill is about promoting democracy and democratic arrangements. One of my concerns, which is a very real one, is that turnouts in elections are low and have been getting lower. There are all sorts of reasons for that, one of which, as I have found on the doorsteps in my constituency—this is not true of everyone, but it is the case with a good number of people—is that people have a poor understanding of the process of voting; they do not actually know how to vote. Many people say that they have voted Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat for years, but we have records showing that they have never voted or have not done so for the past decade. They clearly think that they are voting when they are not voting or they are forgetting what they have done.

Just last week, I spent 20 minutes explaining politics to a lady in my constituency—I explained what the European Parliament, the national Parliament and the council were all about—at the end of which she was very grateful. She had her card with her, so I told her that she should take it down to her local polling station—to the school next door—and put her cross against her preferred party, whatever it might be. She said, "I never knew all this before. Thank you for telling me." She was a sensible person, but she just did not know about this.

I regularly speak in schools—our schools have civics taught in them—and I find that children often understand much more than their parents do about voting. When I explain to schoolchildren how the House of Commons works, I find that they know how it works, but their parents are often unaware of how it works. I have also had experiences where people have referred to me as a councillor, and when I tell them that I am not a councillor they ask me, "What are you?" When I then tell them that I am an MP, they ask, "What is an MP?". I then have to explain, at length, what an MP is and what the difference is between an MP and a councillor. I was once introduced as Councillor Hopkins, so I said that I was not a councillor. I was then introduced as the mayor of Luton, to which I replied that I was not the mayor. I was then asked what I was, so I said, "I am a Member of Parliament."

The level of misunderstanding about politics and simple basics remains quite high among a good number of people. If we are to have a meaningful democracy, we ought at least to have explained to every person how to vote. Some people would think that this is patronising and that I am being unkind about a lot of our citizens, but what I am saying is true. I encounter all this on the doorstep and I am sure that other hon. Members do too.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the merits of the first-past-the post system is that it helps to make democracy more meaningful, because people know who they are voting for and they can put a specific person into power, whereas proportional representation would end that valuable constituency-MP link?

Kelvin Hopkins: I did not realise that my hon. Friend was sitting behind me, but I agree entirely with her. I made exactly the point that she did when I was on "The World at One" last week, having a debate with a colleague from the other place.

Another factor in elections is even more worrying; the Moser report of some 10 years ago concluded that some 20 per cent. of our people are functionally not literate—for some it may be a language problem. Such people make excuses on the doorstep for not voting. They say, "I think you are all the same", "You are all

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crooks" and so on, but what they are really saying is that they do not want to be embarrassed by the fact that they cannot read.

That situation is worrying, but other democracies, where the majority of the population cannot read, find of ways of helping people to vote. India, the largest democracy in the world, had its election in the past few days. The majority of its population cannot read, yet millions who cannot read vote. We must examine that example and try to find ways to help the 20 per cent. who perhaps want to vote but cannot deal with the literacy involved to make progress.

Martin Horwood: The hon. Gentleman is making some important points, many of which I agree with—except for the one about proportional representation, on which he is quite wrong.

I lived in India during a general election period some years ago, and I was impressed by the many steps taken there to increase turnout. They are very low-tech and would be achievable in this country; they include keeping the polls open for many days, moving security around from place to place and taking a more flexible approach to the opening of polling stations. One of the main contributors to people not voting these days is that we always vote on a Thursday. People come home from work and are too tired, they flop in front of "Britain's Got Talent" and they never get around to voting. If we could make it easier we might increase turnout without any clever fixes.

Kelvin Hopkins: I have thought for a long time that we should have two-day voting over a weekend, which would solve that problem. The Indians also use symbols, and we already have party symbols that we could make greater use of. Public service broadcasting should be used sympathetically and carefully to show people how to vote. Children in schools know how to vote, but many of their parents still do not quite get it, and I come across that problem too often.

In the 1970s, in one local election ward in my constituency, one polling district was very affluent, with large houses occupied by sophisticated professional people, and another district was very poor. The turnout in the affluent area was 96 per cent., but in the poorer area it was 22 per cent. That differential turnout makes a mockery of democracy. I do not agree with compulsory voting, but I do want to even up those differences so that everyone who wants to vote can have their say. If we had some sort of legislation to help that happen, we would enhance our democracy greatly.

There is a degree of alienation from politics. Voter turnout has fallen not just because people do not understand how to vote but because they have lost faith in politics. The turnouts in our general elections are rather lower than they are in other countries, and recent statistics from academic research show that optimism about political outcomes in Britain is much lower than in continental countries.

The only thing that correlates with that declining interest in politics is the diminishing difference between the major parties. The two Front Benches are united in agreeing on a particular economic model with which many of us do not agree. Many people outside this place do not agree with it either. That model—globalised neo-liberalism—has brought us to the brink of economic disaster. We should return to a more sensible economic model that actually works. After Bretton Woods, for 25 to 30 years after the second world war, we had stability as well as economic growth that was much better than anything that we have had since. Recently we have had high instability.

People say that we are all the same, and the major parties all support privatisation and outsourcing. Every now and then, there is a tactical retreat by one party or another, but by and large they are united. I do not agree with that. For example, as I have said many times, railway privatisation has been an economic catastrophe. That claim is rejected on both sides in this place, but the great majority of the population knows that it is true and would be happy to see the recreation of a state railway system, as exists on the continent of Europe. The Conservatives are grinning at that idea, but it is true.

The Bill also includes provisions on construction contracts. I was on a housing committee in the 1970s and on one occasion I was told informally that a building worker had said in a pub somewhere that Luton borough council had been charged 15 per cent. over the odds for a housing contract. It was clear that a cartel was being operated by the building companies, and they were allocating contracts between themselves and making excess profits out of the local authorities. I made a speech in the council chamber accusing the builders of those practices. It was reported in the press and received no response, not even a denial. There was something profoundly wrong with that arrangement.

The borough surveyor and the chief executive said that the council had to accept the lowest bid. I suggested then, as I do now, that we should recreate substantial direct labour organisations to be employed by local authorities to build and repair houses. We could use such DLOs as comparators. Local DLOs would do such work on a cost basis and they would not make a profit, so they would provide good competition for private builders. Indeed, I would go further and allow DLOs to work in the private sector. I remember the Lib-Lab pact that was formed in 1978 to keep the Labour Government going until the 1979 election. The one requirement of the Liberals was that the then Government drop a Bill that would have given DLOs the right to work in the private sector. That was a socialist step too far for the Liberals. We are now far removed from such interventionist and direct provision of services, although it was a fine socialist idea that DLOs—which were run by local authorities, democratically controlled and accountable—should have had that ability. I want us to move back in that direction and have DLOs that can not only build houses for the local authority, but provide good competition for the private sector. They would also provide good, secure, well-paid and trade unionised employment for thousands of building workers.

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman said earlier that it was wrong that councils were required to accept the lowest bid and that we should have direct labour organisations as a comparator. Is he saying that councils should not accept any bidder that would undercut the DLO or anyone that would be more expensive? He left it unclear which direction they were supposed to go.

Kelvin Hopkins: There would still be a private sector. Although I am a fan of DLOs, I do remember that some were not good. I was actively involved with the Association of Direct Labour Organisations, so I used to visit them. Manchester and Sheffield had first class DLOs, but some of those in the London boroughs were, frankly, corrupt. When the cost charged for work by some of the London DLOs was compared with the cost for those in the north-east and north-west, it was found to be four times higher. It is fine to have good private sector builders, but good DLOs should also be allowed, if local authorities want them. Public sector comparators would contribute to ensuring that building took place at reasonable cost.

I have touched on areas that are not yet in the Bill, and I hope that they will be put into the Bill or other legislation later. In any event, I hope that my contribution has been of interest to my right hon. Friend the Minister.

7.58 pm

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins). I agreed with some of his remarks about democracy, but I found his later comments about direct labour organisations a little more difficult to accept. I canvassed in the streets of Camden in the 1987 election and I remember trying to work out why it was that my prospective constituents could not get any repairs done on their council flats in the daytime, but only in the evenings and at weekends. It quickly dawned on me that the DLO staff were sitting around all day doing nothing and doing all the work on overtime. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's recollections of DLOs are rose-tinted, although he did admit some problems existed in urban DLOs. I think his solution would create more problems than it would solve.

I am sorry not to be able to follow the right hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill), because his speech followed the excellent speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) who talked, appropriately enough, about Lilley Bottom. That reminded me of the link between the right hon. Member for Streatham and me, which is the happily named village of Wyre Piddle, around which he had constructed a bypass, for which I am very grateful. When it comes to local democracy, it is such matters that drive us all forward. Wyre Piddle has cause to be grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

I shall concentrate my remarks on parts 4, 5 and 6 of the Bill, which are dealt with in my Committee's report, published in March. I have to say to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan), that it is a great shame that this report, which was published on 13 March, still has not had a response from the Government. It would have been helpful to have had that response in time for Second Reading. I understand that the reason for that is that the Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs, whose responsibility it is to reply, is on paternity leave, but the House is ill-served when a response to a major report from a Committee, dealing directly with legislation to be debated on the Floor of the House, is not available in time for us to know what the Government's judgments are.

When I intervened on the Secretary of State on the subject of the ability of local authorities to opt out of economic prosperity boards, I was disturbed to discover that her reply was simply, "Well, we can discuss this in Committee." The issue was raised by my Committee in its report, the House should have the Government's position before it for this debate, and there will not be time in Committee to cover these matters because of the scandalously short timetable available for such a complex Bill.

It is a complex Bill. It runs to 138 pages and has 146 clauses, seven schedules and nine parts. It is not easy reading. It was subject to extensive amendment in the Lords, more amendments will be required in this place, and I predict confidently that, on Report, we will wade through scores of amendments that will be completely undebated, which is extremely unsatisfactory. I hope that my colleagues on the Front Bench will divide the House on the timetable motion, which is scandalously inadequate for such an important Bill. For a Bill that purports to be about democracy to be railroaded through this House without adequate discussion is profoundly undemocratic. One of the many reasons that we in this place are all in trouble at present is the contempt for the House's procedures that we will see again with this Bill, and that we have seen so often in the past. That is one of the reasons why this place is held in contempt by voters outside—it is not just about our expenses, but about issues such as this, too.

It is also a shame that no Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Minister is in his place on the Bench to hear the debate. The subject of the Bill—local democracy—is primarily a matter for the Department for Communities and Local Government, but economic development and construction are primarily matters for BERR and a BERR Minister should have been here. Of course, we know that the problem is that there are only three BERR Ministers in the Commons, two of whom are shared with other Departments and one of whom is on paternity leave. There is not a BERR Minister spare, but it is a great shame on matters of economic development. I like the DCLG team. The Under-Secretary has been kind to me. We tried to sort something out in respect of automatic rate relief for small businesses, although we failed. I say nothing against the DCLG team, but a BERR Minister should be here too and should be replying to the debate.

Today, we mourn the death of a great comic. Danny La Rue died earlier today. The question about Danny La Rue was whether he was a woman or a man. He did not like the term "drag artist"—he preferred to call himself a comic in a frock. What Danny La Rue was or was not is an interesting matter, and what this Bill is or is not is an interesting matter too. It purports to be about democracy, but it is actually something very different. I am tempted to say that the Secretary of State, when she opened this debate, was wearing a frock. Whether that makes her a comic or not, I am not entirely sure, but I do not think she understood the irony of bringing forward a Bill on democracy in an undemocratic way and with measures that are contrary to the best interests of democracy.

I have recently been embroiled in the row over expenses—I do not want to go down that path at present—as we all have. When I was out canvassing in my constituency with my constituents' full knowledge of my alleged involvement in the scandal, I was struck by the fact that that issue was not raised with me. The issue raised on the doorstep by many of my constituents

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was their sense of powerlessness in the face of an over-mighty Executive and their sense that they do not control their own lives any more. They so often resent us and they resent the apparent abuses of our expenses because they feel we are telling them what to do all the time and to do things they do not want to do all the time while we have our snouts in the trough. There is growing resentment of the political class that seeks to control what happens at a local level far too intensely.

The Bill, in so many respects, makes that problem worse, not better. A Bill about local democracy could have done so much, sweeping away the duties and obligations on local authorities, rather than adding to them. That is the root of true democracy. That is what we should be seeking to do and that is the dreadful wasted opportunity that the Bill represents.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), in his excellent and very thoughtful speech, was in danger of getting into a contradiction, which was explored by I cannot remember who. I am glad to see the right hon. Member for Streatham back in his place—he must read my earlier remarks, but I thank him again for the Wyre Piddle bypass.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon got into an interesting debate about the apparent contradiction between representative and direct democracy. It was a debate I would have loved to continue, because it was very important and goes to the heart of what we should be discussing tonight. What struck me is that what touches my constituents in their day-to-day lives in relation to democracy and control of their lives is planning policy. Planning affects people most directly, and the sense of outrage in my constituency about the South Worcestershire joint core strategy is palpable. We have three councils coming together. Worcester city faces the same problem as Luton, and does not have space within its boundaries to expand—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Luton, North thinks it has, but we have to face the fact: there is not room in Worcester for extra housing in significant numbers.

Worcester has been designated a sub-regional growth centre in the regional spatial strategy, so the two councils around it—Wychavon district council, which covers my constituency, and Malvern Hills district council—have come together with Worcester city council to consider how they can find that housing. Trying to explain to people that the South Worcestershire joint core strategy, driven by three local district councils, is actually the creature of a regional spatial strategy whose parameters have effectively been set by central Government is very difficult indeed. I see my councils being blamed for decisions that the regional assembly was obliged to take because it knew that otherwise the Government would intervene and demand still higher housing numbers.

We are in the bizarre, Alice in Wonderland position of conducting a consultation on the South Worcestershire joint core strategy, knowing that the regional spatial strategy plan revision that has been imposed on the region by the Government is likely to increase the housing demands still further. When we have the joint core strategy in place, we will almost certainly have to revisit it immediately and increase the numbers. There is no local democracy in this process whatsoever. *[Interruption.]* I sense that my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), a former distinguished Minister in this field, is seeking to catch my eye. I will happily give way to him.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): Is my hon. Friend not being too kind to the Government? They have just passed the Planning Act 2008, which means that when the Sizewell C and D proposals in my constituency are put forward, local people will not even be able to discuss the road situation, whether stuff should come in by sea, what will happen to the legacy buildings and the like. Those things will be excluded because some fatuous commissioner will appear from London, take soundings and then go back, and her or his word will be law. That is the worst kind of change, and this Bill does not make it any better—in fact, it makes it worse.

Peter Luff: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful and important point, as he usually does. The sense of powerlessness that local communities feel in the face of the juggernaut of central Government will not do. The answer is that we should have national policy statements, as allowed for in that Act, and that they should be voted for in this House—the Government are resisting that—so that they have the force of law. We should then have the normal, local planning process—no Infrastructure Planning Commission—for the next Sizewell reactor on the strictly local issues. With Sizewell B, how much time did the strictly local issues take out of the process? A couple of weeks?

Mr. Gummer: Thirty days.

Peter Luff: That would be entirely acceptable out of the 300 days. We could have an entirely local process. The local community would have its say on the issues that mattered and the Government would rightly be setting down the national parameters for nuclear power that we actually need. The Government have once again—as in this Bill—taken a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and the nut that they are breaking is local accountability and local democracy.

On the subject of local democracy, another thing that is not in this Bill that I hope will be in an early Bill from a new Conservative Government is the abolition of the Standards Board for England. Again, it significantly inhibits local democracy. I have an extraordinary situation in my constituency, where a major wind farm is being proposed. It falls in the ward of two members of the development control committee, which means that they are unable to express any view whatsoever about the wind farm's merits, whether they are for or against it. I do not know whether they want to stand up to people opposing it or join the opposition, but they cannot express a view, because as soon as they do so, they lose their vote on the development control committee. The situation is utterly bewildering to constituents.

I am trying to resist pressure to express a view on the wind farm because I do not want to trump my two able colleagues on the district council who are being thrown out of the process, with their voices stripped from them. Local councillors exist to express the views of local people, but the Government have put in place mechanisms that take their voice away. There is nothing more undemocratic than removing the voice of a district councillor on a major and sensitive local planning decision. The Bill thus represents another missed opportunity.

Mr. Raynsford: Would the hon. Gentleman like to ask the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) how many times he took decisions regarding planning obligations that took away power from local councils and imposed central Government diktat when he was Secretary of State for the Environment?

Peter Luff: I think that would be procedurally tricky, but my right hon. Friend might try to catch my eye later. I share the concern of the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) about the power of the Secretary of State and the lack of appeal for aggrieved residents in respect of decisions made by the Planning Inspectorate through the Secretary of State.

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Peter Luff: My right hon. Friend has caught my eye. At the risk of being an intermediary in a debate between two Members, I shall give way.

Mr. Gummer: Does my hon. Friend agree that that issue is totally different from institutionalising a mechanism whereby people are excluded from having any view on local matters? If a Secretary of State intervenes, that is because there is a national concern that requires a national input. However, a system that says that no local body or person may take any part whatever in decisions about what happens to their locality—let alone what might happen afterwards with the Secretary of State—is a disgrace.

Peter Luff: I think I shall let my right hon. Friend's wise intervention speak for itself, in case I receive an adverse ruling from the Chair.

The subject of accountability goes to the heart of many of my Committee's concerns about the Bill. Paragraph 119 of our report talks about the "accountability gap" that has been created with regional development agencies. It says:

"The Committee recognises that regional committees"—

the new Regional Select Committees of the House—

"are expected to have a key role in the accountability of the integrated regional strategies and regional governance. It is too soon to judge their effectiveness."

most members of my Committee have a view about the likely effectiveness of those Committees, but we shall see—

"but this Committee does have concerns about whether regional committees will have the time and resources to scrutinise sufficiently regional strategies. Nor is it clear how such scrutiny will fit with existing committees' remits, such as this Committee's scrutiny of BERR and its agencies, including RDAs."

The Bill, and the House generally, is creating a pig's breakfast through the approach on regional and local matters.

As I said in an intervention, this report was the first for which my Committee thought it necessary to insert a lengthy glossary at the beginning, because as Committee members considered the Chairman's draft, they got completely bewildered by the alphabet soup of initials. The array of terms includes EPBs, LALBs, LALFs, RSSs, RDAs, REP PSAs and SNRs, not to mention the single pot budget. Our constituents do not understand the system in operation now, which I am slowly getting my head around as I wrestle with the South Worcestershire joint core strategy and the regional spatial strategy. I cannot begin to think how they will ever understand the new mechanisms, which have major problems with accountability.

I want to talk particularly about the role of regional development agencies, although I shall not take too long because several colleagues wish to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have serious reservations about the existing responsibilities of RDAs. We have heard about the Government's tendency to add endlessly to RDAs' responsibilities. They are Christmas trees on which baubles are regularly hung, with people saying, "Oh, there's a task. Who shall we give it to? I know, the RDA." Such an approach is already diverting RDAs from their core task of helping regional development.

I have changed my view on RDAs. When they were set up, I had one of the worst in the country: Advantage West Midlands. Everyone acknowledged that it was appalling, but it has now got its act together and does useful work locally. It did a fantastic job after the closure of MG Rover on the Birmingham-Bromsgrove borders and following last year's floods in my constituency. It does good, important work by keeping major employment in my constituency and that of the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster).

During the Committee's evidence gathering, we were struck that we heard only one single voice against the existence of RDAs, which was in the evidence given by the TaxPayers Alliance. However, no one else, including the Forum of Private Business, the British Chambers of Commerce, local authorities and non-governmental organisations, was critical, even though the volume of evidence was thick. We did not hear just from the usual suspects, such as Government Departments and quangos. Business itself said that they wanted RDAs, even though they had concerns about many aspects of their work. I have concerns about their overseas work, while local authorities have concerns about boundaries. I am glad that my party's policy is now not to abolish RDAs, but to give a voluntarism about boundaries to local authorities. Essex made a particularly powerful case to our Committee about the inappropriateness of the boundaries of the East of England Development Agency, which are extraordinary, given that the furthest reaches of Suffolk, as represented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal, have little in common with Essex. Such large discrepancies need to be addressed.

I commend the Committee's report to the House—I would—and it is tagged to the debate. It has a useful summary although, in view of the time, I will not examine it for as long as I had hoped. One of the report's overarching themes is the extent to which the proposals lack clarity and detail—a point ably made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden. The provision in the Bill about the local authority leaders' boards says nothing. It does not tell us who will be on the boards, what they will do or what criteria the Secretary of State will apply. Although there are a lot of words in the Bill, they mean very little. Time and time again the Bill lacks clarity. It should have a proper Committee stage so that such clarity can be put in place, but that will not happen because of the time that is being allowed.

A section of the summary sets out the overarching theme of the Committee's report:

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"Most importantly, there needs to be a proper balance between RDAs' business focus and the role of councillors in representing the views of their constituents. We are concerned that the proposals in the Bill about the relationship between RDAs and local authorities place too much weight on the views of RDAs and business interests, particularly during the drafting and agreement of the single integrated regional strategy. We call for the role of local authorities—and of the communities they represent—to be strengthened."

We are the Business and Enterprise Committee, so it is our job to promote economic development and to do what we can to create the business environment for it. However, the message from the business community to us was, "We know better than other people where houses and jobs should go. We have a superior view to the ordinary citizen casting his or her vote at election time." I understand why it said that—it wants certain things, which I respect—but, in a democracy, people have a right to express themselves, to see that view expressed by their local representatives and then to be proved wrong. In fact, more often than not the opinion would not be wrong, because when people are treated like grown ups and involved in a process intelligently, communities will take the right decisions. The idea that decisions should be imposed on them, which lies at the heart of the Bill, is deeply offensive.

The regional strategies have, at present, tenuous democratic accountability. I never was a fan of regional assemblies, but they achieved something. If we were to abolish them, the right thing to do would be to create a forum of local authorities, which would have responsibility for planning policy. There used to be the south-east forum; what was it called? I cannot remember. [HON. MEMBERS: "SERPLAN."] It was SERPLAN, the London and South East Regional Planning Conference. That was the right way to do things. The same was done in the west midlands. That is the way to provide accountability, to avoid too much nimbyism, and to get democratic buy-in, but that just has not happened. That is what worries me. The Bill, particularly in parts 4, 5 and 6, does not address the underlying issues.

There were a host of details in the report. I do not know what the Government response to them is, because we have not received it. We have not had a response on Second Reading, either; I asked the Secretary of State about one specific issue, and she was not able to answer me. It is an important issue, because if an economic prosperity board—by the way, let us call it an economic partnership board; let me suggest that amendment to the Government, because "prosperity" is a difficult word at present. If it were called an economic partnership board, it would have the same initials. If an economic partnership board is composed of willing volunteers, it will work, but if one of them changes political control and is no longer a willing volunteer, and starts being a drag anchor on the rest, it will not work any more. What are the mechanisms by which that unwilling partner can be excluded from the process? It is not clear. The Secretary of State said that we could look at the issue in Committee, but it needs to be looked at now, urgently, because the new bodies—I am very sceptical about the need for them, by the way—must work perfectly from day one. The nation faces an awful challenge in recovering from this dreadful recession, and bureaucracies that do not quite know how they function will not help us to get out of it.

Finally, I should just like to speak up for the Woodland Trust. This point also goes to the heart of one of my Committee's concerns. The trust's submission to Members about the Bill says:

"Proper and meaningful consultation helps ensure transparency and public confidence in decision-making. In its present form there is, however, a risk that the legislation will erode public and stakeholder engagement. The Trust believes that the Bill must provide a statutory role for regional stakeholders such as NGOs".

Given the inadequate democratic structure of the Bill, the cumbersome local authority leaders' board arrangements, and the subsuming of power by regional development agencies over planning policy, which I abhor, it is all the more important that the voices of organisations such as the Woodland Trust are heard. My Committee, in one of its recommendations, said something along the same lines. The trust also points out:

"the strategies should include policies tailored to mitigate, and adapt to, climate change. In practice this could involve implementing policies that protect crucial environmental assets, such as ancient woodland, restore degraded habitats and embark on a strategic expansion of the natural environment to deliver accessible and multifunctional greenspace."

I agree with the trust, which does marvellous work in my constituency and around the country. If such organisations feel excluded from the Bill, its lack of democratic accountability is even more worrying. It is a great duty to vote against the Bill's Second Reading later this evening.

8.21 pm

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Despite her current difficulties with *The Daily Telegraph*, with the Prime Minister and with various other people, I confess to sometimes having a bit of a soft spot for the Secretary of State. Anyone who can run for the deputy leadership of the Labour party under the slogan "I'm nuts about Hazel" deserves some credit for adding a bit of colour and life to British politics. She was absolutely right in some of her opening remarks. There is anger at politicians at the moment, and it should be channelled, if possible, into practical changes. We do need a vibrant and thriving local democracy. We do need more empowerment and civic participation, and she said all that.

However, the Secretary of State and her Ministers must understand that those words sound appallingly hollow to people in my constituency, who have enjoyed endless opportunities to "have their say" during the five-year progress of the south-west regional spatial strategy, from development through to, we hoped at some stage, implementation, and then abolition. There has been an extended, extravagant, and doubtless very expensive pantomime of consultation, which has had virtually no impact at all on the strategy as it has developed. Sadly, my impression is that the Bill will make regional government less democratic, less accountable and even more vulnerable to diktat from the Secretary of State and Ministers.

As the Secretary of State and her Ministers have refused to discuss the impact of individual regional spatial strategies in detail, perhaps they can be forgiven for not actually knowing what really happened in the south-west, and why they have 35,000 public comments, most of them objections, on their desks for consideration. That is part of a total of nearly 100,000 comments—again,

mostly objections, as far as Government offices for the regions can tell—nationwide. That may be why the Bill does not remotely address the real problems of local democracy.

Let me explain what has happened locally during the progress of the south-west regional spatial strategy. In 2005, we had our first opportunity locally to "have our say", in the words of a document produced in Cheltenham. It set out some of the direction of travel of the emerging regional spatial strategy. I went along to a consultation meeting that was held, before I was even elected as a Member of Parliament. There was pretty much unanimity among local community and elected representatives there. We supported more affordable housing, resulting not just from a trickle-down from the private sector, but from giving powers to local councils and, in our case, arm's length management organisations such as Cheltenham Borough Homes, to buy and build more council housing. There was acceptance that quite high numbers of houses should be built in urban areas such as Cheltenham.

I baulk sometimes at accusations of nimbyism from Labour Members who talk about us opposing all new development. They ask, "Where will people live?" but we have accepted consistently the numbers that were set out in RPG10—regional planning guidance note 10—which suggested that as many as 8,100 new homes be built in the urban area of Cheltenham. That figure has received fairly wide acceptance across all parties. It is a very challenging number, but we believe it is potentially deliverable.

What we opposed were the absence of environmental considerations, and the discussion of growth that went far ahead of local population growth. It was apparently based not on population growth in our immediate area, but on a general model handed down from on high that seemed to imagine enormous migration into the south-west, presumably corresponding to some kind of depopulation of the north of England, which would be concentrated around only specific towns and cities.

We specifically opposed the extra housing going into urban extensions. As I said, those urban extensions do not equate to all the extra housing, so it is possible to oppose the urban extensions and still support a great deal of extra housing. The original consultation document about those urban extensions contained comments such as this about the green belt between Cheltenham and Gloucester:

> "It includes some pleasant countryside, which is of lesser landscape significance when compared to the adjoining areas of the Severn Vale or Cotswolds. In reality, it is quite affected by transport corridors, such as . . . the M5 motorway. Parts of this area are very close to the urban centres of Cheltenham and Gloucester, and could provide logical urban extensions in terms of easy transport access. Other parts of the Green Belt are more rural in character and remote from existing development."

Apart from being staggeringly patronising, that is fundamentally wrong. The importance of green belts and other treasured spaces that have been repeatedly rejected for development was not that they were chocolate box Cotswold villages—*[Interruption.]* It would be great if Ministers could listen to this part of the argument, which is important. The importance of green belts is not that they are chocolate box Cotswold villages, but that they are sometimes modest green spaces next to urban populations. In my constituency, it is the urban populations of areas such as Leckhampton, Up Hatherley, Swindon village, Springbank and Hesters Way, which include at least one of the most deprived areas in the south-west, who value the green belt spaces.

Mr. Gummer: Is it not also true that the towns themselves value that gap? People in Felixstowe in my constituency do not want the Trimleys to become part of Felixstowe. They want the gap not just for Trimley St. Mary and Trimley St. Martin, which are small villages, but they want it because of Felixstowe itself, which feels itself to be a town. That bit of land may not be the most beautiful in a beautiful county such as Suffolk, but it is theirs. They recognise the beauty of it and they do not want pompous people from outside suggesting that it is not as good as someone else's.

Martin Horwood: The right hon. Gentleman puts it extremely well. I agree with him entirely on that point. In fact, the places that I listed were not villages. They are parts of the urban body of Cheltenham. It is the modest green space next to them that separates them from Churchdown and from the city of Gloucester. I have nothing against Gloucester. Some of my best friends live in Gloucester, but I do not and I do not wish to, and neither do the people of Cheltenham. We do not want to become part of one great big agglomeration, and the green belt performs a vital task in keeping them apart.

The hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), who is no longer in his place, said that perhaps every case should be looked at on its merits in terms of the loss of green belt and green spaces, but the whole point of the green belt is its permanence. If it becomes negotiable—if every case can be looked at on its merits—that gives a green light to greedy developers to make a beeline for green belt areas that will deliver them more profit. If Cheltenham were an island, it would be obvious where the environmental constraint lay and there would be no question of impinging on the spaces beyond it. Because what we are trying to defend is not sea, but treasured green space, it suddenly becomes negotiable. The real value of that green space to local people, to the environment and to local food production sometimes gets lost.

Through 2006 and 2007 consultations rolled on. We had workshops in Swindon, which were great fun. We had lots of community and elected representatives going to them. Once again, we were pretty united in our opposition to urban extensions. In 2007 the area was flooded and we expected that the housing numbers might be re-examined, and certainly that the urban extensions in flood risk areas such as Cheltenham and Tewkesbury might be looked at again, but no. As the regional spatial strategy lumbered on, the numbers kept on going up despite the flooding. The proposed urban extensions got bigger and bigger, impinging entirely on green belt on one side of town, and entirely on areas that Government inspectors and planning inquiries had repeatedly rejected for development on the other.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): As the hon. Gentleman is talking about safety and flooding, does he share my disappointment that the economic assessment duty on local authorities does not extend to parish and town councils, such as Canvey Island town council in my constituency, and does not give equal weight to

[Bob Spink]

environmental, social and safety issues that affect Canvey Island, such as flooding and major accident hazard sites?

Martin Horwood: I have a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says. Parish councils in my constituency have actively tried to challenge the regional spatial strategy, but they have been ignored along with everybody else.

The Government have failed to include in the Bill a rigorous definition of "sustainability", so we face a ridiculous situation whereby the Government's own advisers and the Foresight report explain that increased urbanisation increases the risk of flooding, but, yet again, a wider economic priority as defined by the regional development agency is handed down and seen to be far more important than conditions of sustainability. If the Bill does not include such definitions, it will make the situation much worse.

In 2008, the progress ground on and we had the grandly named examination in public. "At last," we thought, "we will actually be consulted in public, so maybe that will make a difference." We all wrote, lobbied and sent postcards and e-mails, although MPs were excluded from the examination in public hearings, apparently because we had a vested interest in speaking. However, I made a lengthy submission, and I am sure that constituency neighbours from other parties made submissions of one length or another.

We again argued against urban extension into our green spaces; that the various communities, which I have already mentioned, had repeatedly rejected and opposed any construction there; that those objections had been supported in repeated votes by local authorities on both sides of the boundary and by local planning inspectors who had considered past planning appeals; and that the 750,000 to 1 million empty homes in this country were more of a priority than building on greenfield sites. We argued also for more regeneration in urban areas, and I quoted the Communities and Local Government Committee's inquiry of a couple of years ago, which heard from the west midlands regional development agency. Ironically, it pointed out that concentrating more development around already affluent towns such as Cheltenham undermined its efforts to attract developers to urban centres.

We even agreed with the emerging strategy for rural housing suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor), who said that if we had to build on greenfield sites, it was better to do so on a small scale, with local and sustainable communities that are isolated from existing communities—to preserve the green space around them—but linked by good public transport. That strategy would help to support rural post offices, schools and shops that are dying because of the lack of people using them.

One interesting thing about the consultation in Swindon was that, while the regional government representatives did not listen, some representatives from local areas did listen to each other, and I was impressed to hear even Conservative members, from counties such as Wiltshire, supporting more housing in very rural areas to help the growth of villages and to sustain local communities. We found unexpected common purpose on the issue.

We supported better local transport, urban light rail and low-carbon vehicles as the alternatives to short car journeys, which, in terms of sustainability, seemed to be the only rationale for the urban extensions. Indeed, low-carbon vehicles are, I hope, only a couple of decades away now, and that is well within the planning scope of either these regional spatial strategies or their successors. We argued that the housing numbers themselves, handed down as they were from national Government models, were unreliable, first, because almost any 20-year model predicting economic and housing development would be unreliable; and secondly, because the growth assumptions were fast becoming out of date. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan), who is seated on the Front Bench, confirmed late last year the economic growth assumptions underlying the south-west regional spatial strategy—still intact, I understand. I am not sure whether he would care to intervene on me to defend them now.

The assumption under the south-west regional spatial strategy is that over the 20-year period, economic growth will average 3.2 per cent.—that is plus 3.2 per cent., I should say, for the avoidance of confusion. Clearly, that is utter fantasy. It is a dangerous assumption. On the ground, it translates into the assumption that towns such as Cheltenham will grow enormously through more economic activity, more migration and more growth. However, it completely ignores the important environmental constraints that we are discussing.

We also argued that the Barker review and the whole strategy that gave rise to the numbers were flawed because the issue was about affordability rather than identified local housing need. In 2004, in evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, Barker herself said that if there was a downturn, the targets should be reduced; the downturn has happened, but the numbers have not been reduced. Ministers questioned by the Environmental Audit Committee steadfastly refused to budge on whether they would ever reduce the numbers in a downturn, as Barker had recommended. The Government have departed from even their own adviser's original strategy and are sticking to the numbers as if they were religious dogma.

There is no connection at all with locally identified housing need. In Cheltenham, the numbers that we have ended up with compare with a housing waiting list of some 3,500 people in my constituency. If a high enough percentage of the original number of 8,500 had been for social housing for rent, that housing need could easily have been coped with. The number that we have ended up with in and around Cheltenham is 13,800. Inevitably, that has forced green belt land and other valuable green spaces into the area freed up for development, and that was based on no rational analysis that I can see. That last bump up in the numbers came as a result of the examination in public and visits by what the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) called "fatuous" inspectors.

Mr. Gummer: Pompous inspectors.

Martin Horwood: Pompous inspectors, then.

I made a freedom of information request to discover exactly how much time those officials had spent in one of the communities into which an urban extension that

had not been in the regional spatial strategy before was added. I discovered that on the trip to examine the various areas, the inspectors in the examination-in-public process went from Bristol to Thornbury, Quedgeley, Brookthorpe, Gloucester docks, Twigworth, Innsworth, Down Hatherley, Brockworth, Gloucester business park, Crickley Hill and the community in question, Leckhampton. They then went on to Shurdington, Cheltenham, Uckington, Swindon—I think they meant Swindon village—Cheltenham racecourse, which implies a strange route, Prestbury, Bishop's Cleeve, Alstonchurch, Tewkesbury, the southern edge of Cheltenham, Avonmouth and the Avon gorge, before finally finishing in Bristol. How long did that tour take—a month, two weeks? No. It was completed in a single day.

My local paper spent time with a satnav and worked out how long could have been spent in each location. The answer was no more than five minutes. In the examination-in-public report, the tour resulted in precisely 12 words relating to the Leckhampton community. They were:

"A further area of search is identified to the south of Cheltenham."

That was it; there was no further explanation or rationale. On that basis, an area that has been fought over for decades—and repeatedly rejected by local planning inquiries and local planning inspectors as inappropriate for development—is to be handed over to greedy developers.

On the other side of Cheltenham, to its north-west, is an area that is almost entirely made up of green belt land; it stretches up to the toxic waste dump at Wingmore farm, and is also being allocated for housing. As both areas are subject to flooding, I would not rush to buy a house in either area. The treasured green fields that people have enjoyed and valued will be built on as a result of the process.

The Bill does not introduce the greater powers for local authorities that we might have sought. It does not seek to consult bodies such as the Sustainable Development Commission or even allow local regional bodies such as Sustainability South West to influence the development of these strategies to bring in more sustainability. Instead, economic prosperity boards will be brought into the process, so we will have more of the manic pursuit of economic growth without regard to sustainability. I would trust a body such as the Sustainable Development Commission to have a positive influence on this, because it might clear out some of the fluff around the definition of sustainability, and the Government could do worse than to consult it on the definition that they should have in the Bill. Jonathon Porritt, who is my constituent, I am proud to say, has done an exceptional job as chair of the commission, and I am sure that he would gladly oblige the Minister by providing him with a robust definition of sustainability that might give the Bill slightly stronger environmental criteria.

We now have a regional spatial strategy based on a completely unsustainable economic growth rate. A growth-based set of housing numbers will be handed down to the regional spatial strategy, but without the growth. What happens when we have growth-based numbers without the growth? The areas that have been brought into play, including all the large greenfield sites and green belt areas, will be the first, not the last ones that developers make a beeline for. The Government introduced the sequential test for greenfield sites and tried to prioritise brownfield sites but have since abandoned it, which might mean that developers end up developing the greenfield sites but never get around to the brownfield ones because, in practice, the numbers will not be delivered.

Nothing in the Bill reassures me that this unsustainable policy will be reversed by the Government, let alone by the democratic will of local communities. There is a lack of a clear definition of sustainability. There is the reinforcement of undemocratic, unaccountable regional governments. There is more hidden power for the centre and the Secretary of State, as my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) rightly pointed out. There is no reference to any obligation to take climate change, either mitigation or adaptation, into account. There is not even a reference to the Government's own natural environment public service agreement as part of the regional strategies. There are precious few environmental safeguards, and there is less democracy and less accountability.

The south-west regional spatial strategy is the last such strategy still awaiting implementation—it is still on the Secretary of State's desk. Perhaps even now she may delight my constituents and get me off her back and those of her Ministers by making some of the changes that local people have asked for. We have some hope of that, but we also have a great deal of fear. My constituents in Leckhampton, Hatherley, Swindon village, Hesters Way and Springbank fear that they will lose their last defence against many of these development proposals, which have already started, and cite the emerging regional spatial strategy as the reason for that. Others fear many other things. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds fears that

"Existing regional spatial strategies are an important part of the toolkit to"

prevent biodiversity loss

"and many contain forward-thinking policies on biodiversity such as the South West Nature Map, which identifies the best areas in the south west region to conserve, create and connect wildlife habitats at a landscape scale. These policies are at threat from a streamlined single regional strategy which prioritises economic growth."

The Campaign to Protect Rural England is certainly fearful of what may happen. It has identified the potential loss of 27,000 hectares of greenfield sites—an area the size of Birmingham is at risk. That means higher CO_2 emissions, loss of local food production, and a catastrophic loss of the green space that is good for our physical and mental health and adds peace and beauty not only to great, sweeping landscapes but on a small scale that is very valuable to local people. It allows them to go for walks in green fields rather than through housing estates, and preserves small fields and small rural environments that are an escape from urban sprawl. Once lost, those vital green spaces will be lost for ever.

Expenses scandals may well be forgotten one day; I think that some hon. Members would like that to happen quite soon. Ministers at the Department should look to the long term and hope that they will not be remembered as the people who empowered regional governments, not local people, and enabled the destruction of large swathes of the British countryside.

8.45 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I sympathise hugely with what the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) has said. I was much amused, but

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

equally horrified, by the journey made by the inspectors from Bristol as they travelled around, ostensibly inspecting where the visitation of development should be placed in his neck of the woods. I sympathise with him not simply because he and I have race courses in our constituencies, but because he described the utter absurdity of this Government's activities in that area of public policy. That absurdity is highlighted and reinforced by the title of the Bill. Others have mentioned it, but it is worth repeating. It is the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill. Let us forget for the purposes of my remarks the aspect of the Bill to do with construction and concentrate on whether it will produce or encourage local democracy or have any effect on economic development.

The provisions in the Bill to set up economic prosperity boards remind me of some sort of Soviet plan or communist China—the direct command economy systems that we thought had died out in the 1980s before the collapse of the iron curtain. But no, this absurd Government, in the final days of their death throes, are coming up with the language of the communist era and the idiotic hope that by passing laws that mean nothing, they will achieve something.

It was notable that the Secretary of State could not be bothered to tell me, when I intervened, how many artificial quangos, boards and other forms of public authority she was creating, or how many they would replace. I suspect that they will not replace any, and that there will be a doubling or trebling of the number of absurd bodies created by this absurd Government in their dying days.

I remind the House that this Government are past masters at the misuse of language. Here we have the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill. I remember in 1998, as the shadow Minister for what was then the Lord Chancellor's Department, having to face up to the current Secretary of State for Transport, who in those days was a Minister in that Department. He was introducing to Parliament something called the Access to Justice Bill. If any piece of legislation did more to deny access to justice, I have yet to see it.

Since then, an avalanche of Bills have been passed by Parliament, at the behest of this Government, with names that wholly misdescribe the purpose and intent behind their contents. They have all been the size of a telephone book, and the current Bill is no exception. They have all had many pages, schedules and clauses. Looking at the backs of them, one finds that they all repealed huge chunks of legislation passed in the recent past by this Government. I find it difficult to admire a Government who continually behave as though passing Bills were the answer to all our problems and do not concentrate on the issues that need to be dealt with.

The fatuous nature of the Bill is highlighted in its early stages, as I pointed out to the Secretary of State. Clause 1, "Democratic arrangements of principal local authorities", states:

"A principal local authority has a duty to promote understanding of the following among local people…the functions of the authority…the democratic arrangements of the authority"

and

"how members of the public can take part in those democratic arrangements and what is involved in taking part."

Those are perfectly laudable aims, but it strikes me that they are not the priority ambition of a local authority. Sensibly, and at an economic public outlay, its priority ambition is to deliver public services at a local level.

We do not need an Act of Parliament to tell a local authority how to give a civics lesson, yet the early part of the Bill is designed to do precisely that. When I intervened on the Secretary of State to ask her why it is thought appropriate for a principal local authority to have a duty to promote understanding of the functions of other bodies, which are not local authorities—I cited independent monitoring boards established under the Prison Act 1952, courts boards and youth offending teams—the answer was a stream of new Labour garbage.

That was followed by an inability to explain clause 4, which states:

"A principal local authority has a duty to promote understanding among local people of… the functions of a lay justice"—

a justice of the peace or a magistrate. There are plenty of people beyond a local authority who can sensibly tell the people in that local authority area what a lay justice does,

"how a member of the public can become a lay justice"

and

"what is involved in being a lay justice."

That is not a function of a local authority. Yes, individuals, citizens and residents in a local authority area, some of whom may be local authority members, can have an interest in what a magistrate does and what is involved in being a lay justice, but surely it is not a function of a local authority, whether a district or a county council, to promulgate the sort of thing in clauses 3 and 4.

Let me use some local examples to deal with the revisions of regional strategy and other matters in part 5. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) has said, the local citizen, resident and elector is most closely touched and affected by a local authority's work through planning matters. I assure the Minister for Local Government and his colleagues that my constituents in Harborough are far more concerned about planning matters than discovering from Harborough district council or Leicestershire county council what a lay magistrate does. I also assure the Minister that, if he came to my constituency, he would be left in no doubt about my constituents' views of several things and what the Government could do with them.

The biggest local planning problem that currently faces my constituency is a plan dreamed up by the Co-operative Wholesale Society, which, by an extraordinary coincidence, comes from Greater Manchester, like the Secretary of State—I put that to one side. It owns 5,000 acres of reasonable, albeit not prime, agricultural land, which it has farmed since just after the first world war. In the past 18 years, since I became a Member of Parliament for the constituency, it has attempted three times to build on it. I understand why it wants to do that, because, at the moment, one gets more money from building houses than from farming. However, if people are to behave as good neighbours, they should take account of their neighbours' concerns when they decide to build additional housing.

We are considering not an eco-village of 2,000 or 3,000 people, but a massive new town of 40,000 people—twice the size of Market Harborough. That great town will be plonked—parachuted into the middle of rural

Leicestershire—between Market Harborough, to its south, and Leicester, immediately to its north-west. The Co-operative Wholesale Society doubtless reckons that, given its close relations with the Labour party and the use of the word "eco" stuck in front of "town", it has a swimming chance of getting the town of 40,000 people up and running.

If we are to have local democracy, economic development and sensible construction, the Bill will not appease my constituents if the eco-town plan goes through. We have agreement in Harborough district and with Labour Members who represent the city of Leicester—I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) in his place—and the affected Conservative Members, who are my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alan Duncan) and myself. This is not all that unusual, but we even have agreement from Liberal Democrat district and county councillors. We also have agreement from the best run county council in the country, Leicestershire, which is run by Mr. David Parsons—I hope that he is returned with a thumping great majority on Thursday, along with an increased number of Conservative councillors. We also have agreement with the citizenry—the voters, the electorate—of those parts of Leicestershire that will be most directly affected by this appalling scheme.

But what has happened? The Government pay absolutely no attention to cross-party or individual objections, nor does the Co-operative Wholesale Society, which has behaved with the tin ear of some petty despot, as it seeks to railroad the plan through, with the connivance of central Government, to the detriment of my constituents.

Mr. Gummer: Will my hon. and learned Friend add to the list of ridiculous expressions the phrase "eco-town"? What kind of eco-town can result in 40,000 homes being built in an area that is currently rural? That is not an eco-town; it is an eco-outrage. Only this Government could call it an eco-town.

Mr. Garnier: I entirely agree. Only the Co-operative Wholesale Society could jump on that bandwagon in the hope of having a third shot at building on that site. It tried to build a new town when I first became a Member of Parliament. Its plans were accompanied by lots of pretty brochures and pictures of butterflies and birds and so forth, but the plan was exactly the same as before. It did not involve such an intensive amount of building or such a huge operation, but none the less, that was the plan. When that plan failed, the Co-operative Wholesale Society withdrew it. In 2007, the society came up with something called a sustainable urban extension, or SUE. It wanted to build a projectile of buildings from Oadby and Wigston, the suburban borough in my constituency that is right up against the city of Leicester, into the area concerned.

The Prime Minister returned from China in late summer or early autumn of 2007—he had been Prime Minister for just a few weeks by then—having spoken to the leadership of the People's Republic of China, where I understand the planning laws are rather different. He returned with an enthusiastic desire to build something like 10, 12 or 15 eco-towns, which would no doubt be similar to the eco-cities that he saw in China. The hapless Housing Minister—I have forgotten who it was; there have been one or two since—was invited, in that polite way that the Prime Minister has, to provide him with a list of 10 sites from a wider list of 50 or so sites.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire has had problems with an eco-town in his area. As I said a moment ago, the hon. Member for Leicester, South and I have also been battling hard together with our colleagues and neighbours to ensure that the idiotic scheme does not go through. However, the scheme has now become involved in murky politics, deals and everything other than proper planning and the proper assessment of the evidence. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, there are also district councillors who are itching to say something about a scheme that will destroy their districts, but they are precluded from saying anything because the Standards Board for England will jump on them and say, "Ah, you're now parti pris and therefore may not carry out your local democratic function of being a representative of your own electorate." That is absurd and Kafkaesque, and it must stop.

There are two other hideous blots on the landscape of Harborough that will not be improved by this Bill. The first is the random depositing of wind farms in my part of rural Leicestershire. There is a case for wind farms and for developing alternative sources of energy, but these things need to be done in the right place. If we destroy something that is beautiful simply because we can—and, incidentally, because we have a subsidy from the East Midlands Development Agency to do so—we will be doing so for the wrong reasons and in the wrong place. It is more difficult than pulling hens' teeth to get common sense out of this Government, the East Midlands Development Agency or the developers of such projects. I fear that there is nothing in the Bill that will make my constituents' lives any easier.

A further planning matter that is not going to be sorted out by the Bill or dealt with in an enhanced demographic way relates to East Midlands airport. The airport is not in my constituency; it is in north-west Leicestershire. In May 2005, just as the general election campaign was beginning, the Government thought that it would be a good time not so much to bury bad news as to announce it. They announced a change in the air routes of the flights into the airport from the west to the south and to the east and, guess what, the airport—which is owned by the Manchester Airports Group; a strange connection, that—is now hoping that a night flight will come into the airport over my constituency in rural south-east Leicestershire once every 90 seconds.

East Midlands airport wants to promote itself as the freight hub of England, and good luck to it. I suggest, however, that it—and the Co-operative Wholesale Society of Manchester—must do things for my constituents, rather than doing things to them for its own exclusive economic benefit. All the profits from the airport tend to get sucked back into Manchester. None of those profits seem to come to my constituents, so far as jobs, beneficial environmental circumstances or access to the airport are concerned. We get the downside, while Manchester seems to get the upside, in terms of money and of a reduction in council tax bills, because the Manchester Airports Group is owned by the local authorities of Manchester.

This might sound like a rant, but I am desperately—

Sir Peter Soulsby: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Garnier: Of course I will.

Sir Peter Soulsby: Before the hon. and learned Gentleman sits down, will he return briefly to the powerful case that he was making against the proposed eco-town in his constituency and on the bounds of my constituency in the context of the Bill? He made a powerful case which is, as he has said, supported by members of all parties on the county council. He was right to remind the House of that this evening. Does he agree that two particularly absurd contentions lie at the heart of the Co-op's assumptions about the proposed eco-town? The first is that car ownership in the area could be held down to one car for every two households. The second is that some 60 per cent. of the people who would live in the area would be employed in the area. Both contentions are absurd and would have potentially disastrous effects on the infrastructure in his constituency and on the transport infrastructure and regeneration in mine.

Mr. Garnier: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. The Co-op's proposal is that only one car would be allowed for every two households—I have no idea whether people would have to share a car and ring their neighbour to ask whether they could use it on a particular day—and that 60 per cent. of the people living in the eco-town would work in it. Those suggestions are utterly absurd and wholly unrealistic. It gets worse, however, because the Co-op wants—at someone else's expense—to ram a tram line from the middle of my constituency straight through some of the roads in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Various tram stops and park and ride systems have been proposed, including one park and ride facility at Coles nurseries in Scraptoft to serve the Thurnby, Bushby and Scraptoft areas. But guess who had not been told about the proposal? Coles nurseries. That must be local democracy at work à la new Labour.

I really despair when a Bill such as this is given only four sittings in Committee; it has to be out of Committee by 18 June. Given the kind of infrastructure projects that the Government want to encourage, the term "democracy" is wholly meaningless in this context. I urge all right hon. and hon. Gentlemen and Ladies who are elsewhere to return to the Chamber soon, so that they and those in the Chamber can vote this wretched piece of legislation into oblivion, along with the Government.

9.4 pm

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): It has been an interesting debate, and two identifying characteristics perhaps stand out at the end of the day. The first is the theme of so many speeches from all parts of the Chamber—querying whether the Bill is really necessary. Local examples have been used to show where the Bill is likely to fall down in achieving its objectives and might be deemed irrelevant. So many speeches caught that flavour. The second identifying theme might turn out to be that this is one of the first pieces of legislation that the House has had to deal with post parliamentary apocalypse—in other words, post the sense that we gained while away last week and in the couple of weeks preceding it that something profound is happening outside the Chamber in the community. It was first associated with expenses and the like, but then became focused on a more general dissatisfaction with the political process and how it is run. This Bill might be one of the first that can be identified as asking this Parliament, "Do they really get it? Do they really understand why people feel so aggrieved at the way in which we do business and our democracy works? Have they really understood why people outside are so profoundly dissatisfied?"

A couple of colleagues—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier)—have mentioned the Standards Board. There is a patent absurdity in ruling out those who are elected to represent a particular area from being able to speak on a topic that concerns them. We know that that it is absurd, the Government must know that it is absurd and the public certainly know it is absurd to elect someone in an area where a profound issue needs to be dealt with, only for them to be prevented from speaking about it. That is one of those things that people outside Parliament regard as utterly frustrating and it angers them enormously, yet all of us—the system—seem unable to do anything about it. Sooner or later, if we get it, we must recognise that such absurdities will have to go. The sense of powerlessness that people have expressed recently has caught us unaware in one aspect of our lives in this particular place, but it might well catch us out in other aspects as well. We can look through the Bill and find examples of where that might be the case.

My first concern therefore goes to the very heart of part 1; it is about the strictures concerning democracy. Do we get it? What is the point of the Bill's argument in creating a duty to promote democracy? In introducing the Bill in the other place, the noble Baroness Andrews said that there was

> "always the temptation to shy away from local discretion and flexibility".

As a Government Minister, she would know about that. She continued:

> "That would be the wrong response. Across our communities, people are facing uncertain circumstances, particularly in housing and jobs."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 December 2008; Vol. 706, c. 850.]

People are certainly facing that in North-East Bedfordshire, because unemployment has risen by 182 per cent. in a year. I repeat: my constituency has seen a 182 per cent. rise in unemployment in just one year. I say that because if Labour were in opposition and a Conservative Government had presided over a 182 per cent. increase in a year, I suspect that this place would be in uproar and that people would be on the streets outside. The issue, however, has somehow been glossed over, because the public have been persuaded by the Government that it is just one of those things that they cannot control. I am not sure whether the Government get it—the fact that one of the reasons for people being angry is this sense of powerlessness in respect of unemployment, as they were promised that boom and bust would go away, but feel that nothing is being done about the problem. The noble baroness was quite right to mention uncertain circumstances, particularly in housing and jobs, but I do not get any sense that anything in the Bill is designed practically to deal with them.

Bob Spink: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is being most generous. Will he allow me to give another reason for the fact that the public simply do not get it? The Bill could, but fails to, create a safe policy for sites of major accident hazard such as those on Canvey

Island, providing proper separation between residential homes and schools and those dangerous industrial sites. The Bill represents a lost opportunity.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman makes his own point.

Once again, a Government with good intentions fall down at the point of legislation. We have seen it before: good intention smothered by over-regulation and sometimes a failure to deliver the resources that are needed to provide something—in this instance, a duty for local authorities to promote democracy.

Let me offer a challenge to the Minister that I offered to the Secretary of State at the beginning of the debate. If a local authority has been given a duty, what happens if it is deemed to have failed in that duty? What sanction will be imposed on an authority that is deemed to have failed? What criteria will enable someone to judge whether it has fulfilled its duty? If I, as an individual citizen, wished to mount an action against my local authority because I believed that it had failed in its duty to promote democracy, where would I start? What court or tribunal would I go to?

I think that my noble Friend Lord Ullswater had it right when he said on Second Reading in the other place that

"local councils have been undertaking this work"—

the promotion of democracy—

"for decades. From now on, local authorities will have to refer to statutory guidance on how to fulfil this duty. I am sure that it will become one of the numerous performance indicators that waste so much of local authority officers' time in compiling for audit. That is the top-down approach, which really does not empower local authorities."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 7 December 2008; Vol. 706, c. 877.]

I think that he was quite right. Once again, we have provided an opportunity for those who control local government, those who audit it and those who direct it from above to create a whole new panoply of criteria and performance standards against which a local authority is to be judged on matters with which it has already been dealing and which local people will not regard as being anything like as relevant as other issues that they wish to take up. So I am not impressed by the duty to promote that appears at the beginning of the Bill.

That democracy matters at local level is clearly important, and there is one matter on which I think that the Minister and I would agree. If we are to rekindle democracy in this country in the wake of what has happened recently, I do not think that any of us will exclude the contribution of local political parties to what must be done. Apart from our sense of a collective failure of Parliament, I think we are missing something if we do not recognise the change that has come over the nature of local political parties during our lifetime and perhaps the generation before.

We have moved away from the mass parties of the 1950s and 1960s, which provided a broad base of understanding of how politics worked locally. All too often now, local political parties are small. They are becoming more and more exclusive. The burden of carrying the local political flag has been falling on the same shoulders for a long time and people have worked exceptionally hard, but the refreshment that they used to receive has not been coming. That refreshment was made up of people who would, in their time, stand for representation on local authorities, understand the political process, explain it to others, and in some cases constitute the base of those who moved into national Government.

If we are to re-examine the constitution from top to bottom, and recognise the anxiety that people feel outside, at some stage we shall have to examine the role of local political parties across the board and see what they can contribute to change. If we exclude them from our considerations of the promotion of democracy, I think we will be missing something. The public out there do not feel that we represent them through our political party structure in the same way as they used to. That may be partly due to the nature of change in society and the fact that people have more choice on a variety of issues, but they still find themselves with the same political choice that they had 80 or 90 years ago. By and large, they do not have the same choice in any other sphere of life. If local authorities are to get to grips with promoting democracy, I think that they should look at local political parties, and I suggest that we do so as well.

I wish to talk briefly about two other parts of the Bill. Part 5 deals with regional issues, and I share my colleagues' concern that an opportunity to dismantle structure has not been taken. I have been involved in this argument with the Government for some time in respect of their own relationship with local government. Ultimately, the Government have to take a risk with local government, because either they trust it or they do not. The same challenge will occupy the time of my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State should she inherit responsibility when we form a Government. If one trusts local government, one really has to trust it, and that involves a degree of risk. I do not see this Government being able to do that, because although they talk the talk, they do not quite deliver. One example is regional strategy. The Bill was an opportunity for the Government, if they really believed in local government, to do away with the regional tiers and hand back real authority to local councils, but they have not taken it.

I wish to touch on two particular examples from my local area: housing numbers; and the difficult issue of Gypsy and Traveller sites. The two new authorities in Bedfordshire following the unitary change, Central Bedfordshire council and Bedford borough council, now have to deal with the planning totals set by the regional spatial strategy. In Central Bedfordshire, that will require 60,000 more houses by 2031. To give the House a sense of scale, I should say that that will require a 50 per cent. increase in population in just 20 years or so in Bedfordshire. The scale of change is extraordinary and much of it is derived not from the pressure of growth in Bedfordshire itself, but from what is happening in the neighbouring growth areas of Luton, Milton Keynes and Bedford. They cannot cope with the infrastructure problems. The eastern region reckons that £1 billion of transport infrastructure is needed to support all this, but there is currently £80 million in the budget for it.

Bedford borough council, which is now a unitary authority, will be expected to provide 19,500 more houses by 2021, but it has never met previous growth targets, because there was not the infrastructure and engine of growth in Bedford to produce these things. Those are the targets being set by a regional body that has no real understanding of the pressures and needs of

[Alistair Burt]

Bedford itself. This should not be happening; Bedford councillors should take decisions on the needs of Bedford people in respect of the expansion in housing. Through this Bill the Government have missed an opportunity to take that approach.

The second issue that I wish to discuss relates to the difficult problems of Gypsy and Traveller sites, which everyone in this place knows are an issue. What has happened in my area is that decisions originally taken by local authorities in terms of their suggested numbers to meet need and demand have then been taken by the regional spatial strategy and the numbers have increased—the numbers were increased further last December. Local councils are now trying to find a number of pitches that they never agreed to and, again, local people feel abandoned because they cannot have a say.

We all know that the issue is difficult. The local authority will have to provide, but the local authority and its councillors are not accountable for decisions taken that dramatically affect their local communities. The issues in Stotfold and Arlesey in particular, where Conservative local councils have fought continuously in recent times against a very difficult development, emphasise that. When thousands of people in the area protested and wanted to make their opposition to this policy known, they knew that ultimately if their local authority does not move fast enough on the regional spatial programme, the Government have powers to intervene in the planning process, take the planning rights away from the local authority and make the decision over its head. That is an example of how regional top-down control is removing local power, and it is another particular area where the Government do not get it and do not understand why people outside are so frustrated.

Peter Luff: On this important point, is my hon. Friend's area experiencing the problem encountered in my constituency? Wychavon district council has sought to do the right thing by the Traveller community and provide adequate pitches, but finds that its reward is that as it "attracts" more Travellers to the area the Government and the regional strategy impose more and more requirements on that particular area and not on other district councils. Doing the right thing and behaving responsibly are punished, rather than rewarded.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. It is an immensely difficult process, and I am sure that he shares my frustration with it. In the end, it is local councillors who should make the decision, not unelected people in a tier above.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Is it not an added absurdity that if a local authority turns down an application for an illegal Gypsy site such as several of those in my constituency, the planning authority can overturn that local decision on the spurious grounds that insufficient provision has been made for Gypsies and Travellers elsewhere in the area, even though demand appears limited? Surely it is right that the local council should decide how many Gypsies and Travellers there are in the area and how to provide for them.

Alistair Burt: The inspector turns down local feelings expressed by a local planning decision on the grounds of numbers to which the local authority has not had the opportunity to object, let alone control. The numbers are decided by others, so everybody involved in the process feels dissatisfied, not least—on some occasions—Gypsies and Travellers themselves, because they do not get the opportunity to put their case locally. An opportunity for the communities to come closer together is missed in the process of making such decisions regionally.

I have given two examples, and I cannot believe that the Bill proposes to compound the problem by taking planning powers away from regional assemblies and the regional spatial strategy, and giving them to regional development agencies. I do not know anyone in an RDA who wants these powers. The role is totally unnecessary and not connected to their core activities. They know that their future is under question anyway, and this is the last thing that they want. I wish that the Government had listened and made a different decision.

I agree with the point made by the Campaign to Protect Rural England and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which want to ensure that regional strategies do not have the concentration on economics that the Bill will give them. It sets great store by regional economic development without a necessary and similar interest in biodiversity and the environment. I prefer the alternative—local economies working together in a voluntary capacity, recognising the need to work together without a supervening structure being imposed on them. That is a difficult concept for Labour Members to grasp, but I hope that they will recognise those environmental needs when they get the chance.

On part 4 of the Bill, I wish to say a word on behalf of town and parish councils in relation to their involvement in the local authority economic assessment. I am blessed in North-East Bedfordshire with 34 parish councils and five town councils in Arlesey, Biggleswade, Sandy, Potton and Stotfold. They are staffed by people who work incredibly hard for their local area, and their local knowledge is second to none. I hope that the Bill will properly recognise their role. I do not want a shopping list of authorities that are statutory consultees. That was originally in the Bill, but it has been shelved, and that is a good thing. However, it would be nice to have a recognition from the Minister that should these local authority economic assessments come to pass, proper acknowledgement will be made of the work of parish and town councils. I strongly support their continuing development and the work that they do.

This has been an interesting debate, and some of the messages from it will resonate with the public when they realise that we are at last getting to grips with some of their frustrations. There are many things that will not be the same again after the last few weeks, but one of them must be that when the public tell us about nonsensical things, we deal with them. Several such things have been identified in this debate by my hon. Friends and one or two others. The Bill provides an opportunity for the Minister to stand at the Dispatch Box and say, "We get it. We are not taking forward this Bill, we have heard what's been said and we know we can do better, especially if we let the other side take over in government as soon as possible."

9.24 pm

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): I did not intend to speak in this debate, until it became clear that the Government were making what can only be said to

be a wholly unacceptable proposition. I ask the House to consider clause 2, entitled "Democratic arrangements of connected authorities", which includes the phrase:

"The principal local authority has a duty to promote understanding of the following among local people",

and the second of the matters that the authority has a duty to promote is

"the democratic arrangements of those authorities".

Subsection (3) lists those authorities, and they include the strategic health authority. How can any organisation explain the democratic arrangements of a strategic health authority? There are no democratic arrangements of a strategic health authority. In my constituency, the strategic health authority has just told my constituents that if they are going to have a heart attack they had better move somewhere else. They are going to be transported from Leiston or Felixstowe all the way across the countryside as far as the no doubt excellent hospital on the other side of Cambridge. That is a journey of more than 100 miles and they will be given 90 minutes in which to do it on the A14, which is often closed.

When the health authority was asked whether the public could comment, the only person who supported it was the hon. Member for Ipswich (Chris Mole), who seemed to say that whatever it said was perfectly all right. There was no public inquiry; there was no opportunity for the public to make any comment at all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. Did the right hon. Gentleman inform the hon. Member for Ipswich (Chris Mole) that he was going to make those comments?

Mr. Gummer: I am very sorry. I see that the hon. Gentleman is in the House at the moment, and it is therefore normally acceptable to mention what is in the public domain. It is in the public domain that the hon. Gentleman said that, and I therefore think it reasonable to mention it, as he is in the House. I would not have mentioned had he not been here.

For Suffolk county council to teach the people of Suffolk about the democratic methods of the strategic health authority would be impossible. Why do we have a Bill before us that it is impossible to carry through? What happens if I bring a case against Suffolk county council for not informing me of the democratic arrangements of the strategic health authority? The council has an absolute answer in law—it can say that it has no democratic system. It can say that of a series of other authorities listed in the subsection. Primary care trusts are among those authorities listed—no primary care trust has any democratic relationship with the public at all. What could the council say about a local probation board or a probation trust? What could it say about an integrated transport authority, a waste disposal authority, a joint waste disposal authority or a national park authority, which is specifically set up to avoid local people running that part of the country?

The Minister for Local Government will have to make a very good case to explain how, in a Government Bill, a series of statements are made to ask authorities to carry out duties that are impossible. I have sat in this House for more than 30 years and I have to say to the Secretary of State that I have never come across a Bill in all those years that lays on authorities duties that are of their nature impossible. I hope she will come to this House and explain how a county council can give to the public information about the democratic accountability of a strategic health authority. Those of us who now know that we will be subject to decisions without any kind of discussion—without the county council being allowed even to use the strategic committee to object, because the Government chose to pass those arrangements at a time when there was purdah—will want to ask the Secretary of State how she dares to put in the Bill something that it is impossible to carry through.

When the Government introduce a Bill, I suggest that the House always look at their words particularly carefully. If they use the words "local democracy", they mean that the measure is neither local nor democratic. It is rather like the climate change levy, which does nothing to combat climate change, although anyone who opposes it is supposed to be insufficiently enthusiastic about fighting climate change. Similarly, if anyone opposes this local democracy Bill, the Government will say that they are not keen on local democracy. In fact, anyone who votes for the Bill is not keen on local democracy, for it has nothing to do with local democracy, but a great deal to do with reinforcing the removal of democratic control over local decisions and laying impossible demands upon local authorities. I look forward to hearing the Minister for Local Government's explanation of what he would say if he were the leader of my county council and he was asked the simple question, "What is the democratic arrangement by which the strategic health authority operates?"

9.31 pm

Mr. Paul Goodman (Wycombe) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) has just made a brief speech combining deep local feeling with an expert reading of aspects of the Bill. His speech was entirely appropriate because we have had an expert, well-informed and wide-ranging debate since 3.30 pm, as no statement preceded it. I have been in the Chamber since then, so I have heard all the speeches and I intend to comment on them all in some detail, as they deserve.

I must flesh out the context in which the Bill is set, but before I do even that, I shall make one simple point. The Secretary of State, as ever, gave a bouncy, feisty and energetic speech enthusiastically backing the Bill—[Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] I am glad that Labour Members are cheering, because not one single speech by another Labour Member enthusiastically supported the Bill at all. As I was in the Chamber, unlike some Members on the Treasury Bench, I took a careful note of what was said.

The right hon. Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) made a powerful speech about one particular point. He said, "I was wrong," and, as he pointed out, it is seldom that a Member is gracious enough to admit that. I hope that the Minister for Local Government listened to him carefully and that he might give him a place on the Public Bill Committee.

The right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) came the nearest to defending the Bill, although he said that he did not give it an "unqualified welcome"—I wrote that bit down especially carefully. On the provision for petitions, he said, "Probably the less said about that the better," and that was almost as enthusiastic as Labour Members got.

[Mr. Paul Goodman]

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) said rather hesitantly that the Bill should get further consideration, which was very generous of him. He then referred to Enver Hoxha-ist appellations in relation to regional authorities—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps Labour Members are more familiar with Marxist terminology than I am. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will be able to serve on the Committee and improve the Bill.

The most profound speech made by a Labour Member was that of the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Graham Stringer), who spoke early in our debate. He was entirely within his rights to be critical about what happened in local government in the 1980s, but he was honest enough to note that there has been "increasing centralisation" under this Government. He gave a masterly and philosophically rigorous analysis of the Bill and concluded that it was a lost opportunity. I hope that the House listened to him carefully and that he too will serve on the Public Bill Committee.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) noted, the Bill comes at a moment of crisis for our democracy in general, and the House in particular. It is no exaggeration to say that a hurricane has swept through the House of Commons in recent weeks. Of course, it is in the nature of hurricanes to devastate the guilty and the innocent alike. I guess that not a single Member here in the Chamber tonight will have been unaffected by the events of recent weeks. Some will now leave the House at the next election. Most of us here this evening have been subject to media attention that has been not entirely complimentary; I put it no stronger than that. We are to lose a Speaker. Seldom, if ever, during the long procession of history has the reputation of this House stood so low.

Ultimately, the crisis is not about us, or the reputation of 650 or so individual Members of Parliament. It is not even about the reputation of this House as a corporate body. It is about much more. It is about a damaged political system that mirrors our damaged economy. We are in crisis because the whole system is in crisis. If people believe that their elected representatives, whether Members of Parliament or local councillors, are powerless, and that real power lies elsewhere—in the European Union, with an over-mighty Executive, with unelected regional assemblies, or with unaccountable quangos set up by this Government—those representatives will fall into contempt, and they will come to be seen as all the same. In a key respect, they will indeed be all the same: they will, as the saying has it, be in office but not in power.

Ministers across the Dispatch Box from me know all that full well, even if they cannot or will not admit it. The Minister for Local Government will respond to the debate; I have been his opposite number many times, in proceedings on the Finance Bill and elsewhere. He is always very pleasant, rational and charming, and he always does the best possible job, as he will this evening, of defending the indefensible. They all know perfectly where their philosophy of big government, with its regional assemblies, development agencies and spatial strategies, and all the other things denounced so eloquently by the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) in his characteristically energetic and uncontrollable way, has brought the country in general, and local government in particular. A single statistic illustrates the point. Turnout in last year's council elections was 35 per cent. We all hope and pray that it will be better on Thursday, but we cannot be sure, let alone have complete confidence. Ministers know the consequences for their Government, for the Prime Minister and for themselves as it all goes wrong for them—as this dishevelled and demoralised Administration limps through to its fifth year, desperate to avoid the general election that the Prime Minister never had the courage to call.

The Bill gave the Ministers present perhaps the very last chance to fix our broken politics by radically redistributing power, by tearing up the culture of central control, box ticking and target meeting, and by restoring autonomy and control to local government, thus making space for the restoration of civic pride and confidence. Instead, far from striking the chains from local government, the Bill puts new ones in place. One would have thought that local councils and councillors could be trusted to promote democracy, and that if they did not, local people would be capable of electing new councillors who were—but apparently not, according to the Bill. According to the Government, local councillors simply are not up to it; they have to be managed and mollycoddled. They have to have it all set out in statute. A whole chapter of the Bill, chapter 1 of part 1, sets out for local authorities the means by which they must be organised and must promote democracy.

Again, one would have thought that local councillors could be trusted to respond to petitions, and that if they did not respond to them, local people would be capable of choosing new councillors who did—but again, apparently not. A whole section of the Bill has to set out, in black and white, instructions for local councillors in case they are not capable of responding to petitions themselves—all that in a Bill that has already had some 170 amendments, and that will not be considered for very long in Committee. As hon. Members will see if they care to flick through the Bill, it is full of more powers delegated to the Secretary of State, and more powers to be exercised by statutory instrument. Every single clause is full of such powers.

Let me turn briefly to some of the speeches. I very much enjoyed what the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) said about the expert tour made so briefly by planning bodies in his area; they spared five minutes for each place visited in Cheltenham. He put his experience vividly and well. I should also mention my hon. Friends the Members for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) and for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). This last made a philosophical speech that tried to balance out where power should truly lie. They all contributed very well to the debate. Yet again, we heard a speech from the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich followed by one from my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon. They are capable of going round the music halls as a double act. They must sometimes feel that they have been joined at the hip.

The Bill could have been bold and done many good things. It could have empowered councils to set up new local housing trusts, giving local people the freedom to build the homes they want. It could have empowered

councils to keep some of the proceeds of local growth, and it could have empowered councils by giving them a general power of competence—radical reform that would pave the way for the end of local administration and the revival of real local government.

As well as giving power to local councils, the Bill could have taken it away from central Government. It could have made a bonfire of diktats and controls. It could have scrapped capping, process targets and the imposition, whether they liked it or not, of the cabinet system on local councils. It could have scrapped altogether the reviled and discredited Standards Board. It could have scrapped the comprehensive area assessment and returned local government planning and housing powers where they belong—to local councils.

Unfortunately, the Bill does none of those things. It gave Ministers on the Treasury Bench a last chance to rise to the scale of the crisis that confronts them, and they have comprehensively failed to take it. There they sit, out of ideas, out of luck, out of time, and shortly to be out of office. I ask my right hon. and hon. Friends to join us in the Lobby tonight.

9.41 pm

The Minister for Local Government (John Healey): This has been a very good debate. It follows full proceedings in the other place, which were ably led from the Government Benches by Baroness Andrews and Lord Patel, with strong contributions from all parts of that House, as there have been tonight. There were strongly felt but reflective contributions from both sides of the Chamber this evening—expertise from local government and of local government within national Government.

I cannot recall a Bill that I have led or a debate to which I have responded in the House when quite so many Members on both sides with direct ministerial experience of the issues at the centre of the debate have contributed. I welcome that and encourage all to continue that debate with me and the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan) in Committee. I look forward to that.

The Bill has two broad aims, both of which developed from earlier legislation and earlier policy statements that we have issued. The first broad aim is to continue the drive towards stronger local democracy, with more powers both for local authorities and for local people to hold their local authorities to account—principles set out in the White Paper, "Communities in control". The second aim is to do more to promote economic recovery and long-term prosperity and economic development, implementing the proposals first set out in the sub-national review of economic development and regeneration.

As the Conservative chairman of the Local Government Association said, the Bill will give councillors the power to effect real economic change in their local areas. She was right about that. I was interested in the speech from the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). He was right, and he was the only one to say this tonight: in the crisis that we face, political parties have an important role. While we look at the proceedings of our own Parliament and at questions over the constitution and the political system for the future, we need political parties that are more active, particularly locally and we, as leading members of those parties, have a big part to play within our own parties.

The Bill may well be, as the hon. Gentleman said, the first Bill that the House is considering after the *Telegraph* apocalypse, as he put it, but it does not set out to answer all the questions that have been raised about our politics over the past two to three weeks. It is not constitutional reform legislation, but it sets out a series of sensible, useful steps to improve the way that local authorities can respond to their residents and the ways in which they can work together. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, the Bill is important at the moment because we are trying to ensure that people's anger is answered in some way—modestly, in this Bill—through practical changes that both allow them to see more decisions taken within their reach and give them greater influence over and information about such decisions, not just by local authorities but by other agencies in their area. That is what the Bill sets out to do.

I commented earlier on the high quality of most contributions, but I was really disappointed by the contribution of the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) from the Opposition Front Bench, and by that of her hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr. Goodman) just now. She either misreads or misrepresents the Bill's content, because her case against it is confused and her alternative proposals are incoherent at best. She says that much of the Bill is based on best practice and plain common sense, and she is right. The point of the legislation, and the reason it is needed, is that we want all local authorities to do what the best already do. We want them to do so on petitions; by involving people in local decisions not just by councils, but by other local agencies; through a framework, so that those local authorities that want to formalise collaboration with neighbouring local authorities to tackle the economic challenges that go beyond the boundaries of their own area can do so; and by undertaking local economic assessments systematically in every major area.

The hon. Lady became most confused when she moved on to discuss the regions. She said to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Martin Horwood) that if his local authority wanted an RDA, it could have one. Then she said that the Opposition would get rid of the whole regional tier. This is not, as she suggests, a Government or a Bill with an obsession about regionalisation; the legislation is a recognition that it is necessary to do some things beyond the boundaries of single local authorities, because the alternative, as in the past, is that decisions are taken and things are done by Whitehall.

We have regional economies of about 5 million people, and they are as big as some European Union member states. In that respect, our economy in Yorkshire is bigger than those of Norway, of Singapore and of Ireland, so if we do not have serious economic plans in our regions, we will lose out on important inward investment. We need such a policy in all regions, because in the early '80s and '90s too much was centred on the greater south-east, while London overlooked the potential and problems of the north and midlands.

When we consider the big economic shocks that our country has faced in recent years, such as Longbridge, the Selby pit closures, foot and mouth and the summer floods, we see that the RDAs have proved that they can respond more rapidly than Whitehall and with more clout than any single local council. The alternative to regional level action and plans is either national decisions

[John Healey]

taken by people in London without the necessary local knowledge, or big councils holding sway, which means that smaller cities and towns lose out.

Martin Horwood: The Minister cites the regional authorities' response to the floods, but they responded to the 2007 floods in Gloucestershire by increasing the allocations in flood-risk and floodplain areas. Was that sensible?

John Healey: I was talking about the response to those floods by the regional development agencies, which the Opposition want to abolish. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that, in Yorkshire, 24 hours after the floods hit, a scheme to support small businesses was up and running and a two-page application form had been prepared and, within seven days, the first payment had been made to businesses that needed help—regional development agencies responding more quickly than Whitehall could, and with more clout and more sway than a single region or council.

I come to the speech of the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) and I shall tackle the question of petitions, because several Members from both sides have raised it. Fewer than one third of local authorities guarantee a response to petitions, and that is why we want to bring all authorities up to the level of the best. The Bill will ensure, for the first time ever, that when people sign a local petition, they will have a right to a public response. We know that petitions are popular; 90 per cent. of people think that councils should take petitions into account and 84 per cent. say that they would be more likely to sign a petition if a response was guaranteed. When the Local Government Association says that only a third of councils will guarantee a response—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. There are far too many private conversations going on; that is discourteous to the Minister, who is addressing the House.

John Healey: I am grateful for that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I am trying to respond to points made by hon. Members who have sat through the whole debate.

Given that a third of councils do not respond to petitions and that even fewer local authorities make information about how they handle petitions publicly available, we need to make sure that all measure up to the best. That is what the Bill does.

I turn to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Graham Stringer). For a long time, he has been an advocate of local government and a critic of central Government. He took the Government to task by saying that they had been very centralised since 1997. That is a fair characterisation of the early days but in the past few years, as local government has got so much better, we can point to the first ever three-year funding settlement and the cutting of a lot of the funding strings; the removal of many of the reporting requirements and targets; and local area agreements, which are put in place and negotiated with local areas. Furthermore, there have been above-inflation increases in the central Government grants to local government each and every year since 1997. As my hon. Friend will remember, that is absolutely in contrast to the years before 1997, when local government funding was cut.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) generally supported the Bill, and I welcome that. He especially welcomed the formalisation of multi-area agreements, saying that they would particularly help Olympic boroughs such as his; he was right about that. He spoke about electronic payments from parish councils and promised to move amendments and initiate a debate on that issue. If he decides to do that, I shall ensure that we take a close look at his proposals.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) is right that multi-area agreements and leaders' boards are a challenge to direct accountability. The challenge is this: how do we deal with a situation in which there is no directly elected sub-regional or regional government—an idea that ended with the result of the referendum on an elected assembly for the north-east? How do we set up a system in which directly elected representatives can operate and take decisions with implications beyond the boundaries of their own local authority areas? There is no easy answer, but what if some functions are needed at that level and if those functions need to be more open and responsive, and capable of better scrutiny and of being held more publicly to account? In that case, elected council leaders, working through a leaders' board, multi-area agreements in which councils voluntarily sign up to collaborate together, and Regional Select Committees, set up by the House, must be part of the answer.

Mr. Swire: Will the Minister give way?

John Healey: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman and then finish off.

Mr. Swire: Elected regional assemblies, the brainwave of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott)—if that is not an oxymoron—have been abandoned. Is it not time for the Government to admit that tampering with local authority organisation is over and to abandon ideas to force counties such as Devon into a unitary authority? The preferred option is to have enhanced working between the district councils and the existing county councils.

John Healey: I knew that I would regret giving way to the hon. Gentleman. His point relates to a debate for the future, after the boundary committee for England reports in mid-July. The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I and the rest of the House do that his point has nothing to do with the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) immediately "got" the purpose of the Bill and explained clearly how the local authorities in his area, through the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire, are working together to benefit the wider area and need and want a way of formalising the framework within which they can do that. The Bill gives them that opportunity.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) described to the House an area in his constituency known as Lilley Bottom; I am glad that he

did not mix geography with anatomy as he did so. As he will know, his serious point still has to be tested by inspectors, and that does not allow Ministers to comment at this stage. Just to be clear, local councils do not have specific powers to fulfil their house building targets by seeking planning permission to build in the territory of other local authorities, but we do support councils when they look to prepare joint plans and joint initiatives and decide between them how best to accommodate their housing needs.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

John Healey: I will give way one last time, and then, if the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I want to respond to other hon. Members—and right hon. Members; Privy Councillors, therefore—who have contributed to the debate.

Mr. Lilley: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way and for responding to my point. Is he saying that if a council seeks planning permission in another area without the agreement to which he referred, any houses that it builds will therefore not count towards its housing target?

John Healey: No, I am saying that councils do not have specific powers to do that. If the right hon. Gentleman consults the record, he will see that that is exactly what I said.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Keith Hill) is most generous in his blandishments, and he is very good at them. I will have further discussions with the County Councils Network, and meet it if he wishes me to do so, but I cannot promise to change the view that I have taken because there is a very strong case for not making the change that he is looking for.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) is a lifelong committee man, not only on local authorities, with their five or six-hour sittings, as he explained to us, but at the TUC when he worked there. He shared some serious reflections about people often not knowing who does what in a council or what is the distinction between a councillor and an MP. The Bill will help to deal with that problem.

In response to the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff), I hope that his Front Benchers heard his defence of RDAs and the valuable role that they play. His Select Committee's report was very good, and I recommend it to the House, particularly as an endorsement of strong support for a level of governance between central Government and local authorities. I will endeavour to get him a response before we start the Committee proceedings on the Bill.

Some have argued that now is the wrong time to produce the sort of local democratic moves that we have produced in this Bill, but it is precisely at times such as this that these measures are needed. It is now more important than ever to get people more involved in their communities, their local authorities and the other agencies that provide services in their area. People simply will not understand the opposition of the Opposition to these modest and measured steps. Nor will they understand their plans to abolish regional development agencies, regional planning, and regional government offices—in fact, anything that happens to have the prefix "regional" attached to its name. I have to say to the hon. Member for Meriden that if nothing is done above the level of the local council and there is no legal framework for that, we will fail to provide the housing, renewable energy, transport investment, widespread regeneration and business support that this country needs. Her opposition to the Bill does not have the support of her own Tory colleagues in local government, and she should not command the backing of this House. I commend the Bill to the House and urge Members to give it a Second Reading.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 276, Noes 154.

Division No. 141] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Barlow, Ms Celia
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom

Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, rh Keith
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Love, Mr. Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Helen Jones and Ian Lucas

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Duddridge, James
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Main, Anne
Maples, Mr. John
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard

Paice, Mr. James
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, David
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Matthew
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Mr. Roger
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Baron and Mr. Philip Dunne

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION BILL [*LORDS*] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill [*Lords*]:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 18 June 2009.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—*(Claire Ward.)*

The House divided: Ayes 274, Noes 153.

Division No. 142] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Barlow, Ms Celia
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Rosie
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Devine, Mr. Jim
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, rh Ms Patricia
Hill, rh Keith
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Killoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin

Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Malleber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morgan, Julie
Morley, rh Mr. Elliot
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Salter, Martin
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Usher, Kitty
Vaz, rh Keith
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Helen Jones and Ian Lucas

NOES

Alleyne, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Duddridge, James
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Main, Anne
Maples, Mr. John
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rennie, Willie
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Matthew
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr. Roger
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas

Wright, Jeremy	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Yeo, Mr. Tim	**Mr. John Baron and**
Young, rh Sir George	**Mr. Philip Dunne**

Question accordingly agreed to.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION BILL [*LORDS*] (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)).

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State by virtue of the Act;

(2) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England by virtue of the Act;

(3) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable by virtue of any other Act out of money provided by Parliament. —*(Claire Ward.)*

Question agreed to.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CONSTRUCTION BILL [*LORDS*] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)).

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees by—

(a) the Audit Commission for Local Authorities and the National Health Service in England, and

(b) the Auditor General for Wales,

under provisions of the Act relating to the audit of entities connected with local authorities. —*(Claire Ward.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Middle East

10.29 pm

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): By leave of the House, I beg to lay a petition relating to the recent conflict in Gaza between the Palestinians and Israelis. It calls for both sides to work towards a lasting and just peace and a suspension of military aid to both sides, and it calls on the EU and USA to adopt similar practices. The petition has been collected by the Brecknock Peace and Justice Group and contains more than 140 names.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of the Brecknock Peace and Justice Group, and others,

Declares great concern at the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to do everything in his power to work for a lasting and just peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians; to suspend all military aid, co-operation and arms sales to both sides in the conflict until a lasting peace agreement is concluded; and to press both the European Union and the United States of America to adopt similar policies.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000337]

Planning and Development (Essex)

10.31 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I wish to present two petitions, the first of which relates to a limited number of homes in a street in my constituency, hence it is signed by only a few neighbours. None the less, it is of importance to, and represents the views of, the people directly affected and so is of significance. I know that the inspector will carefully consider it and all the relevant facts, and make a wise decision that will be fair to all the parties involved.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of Mr and Mrs Hall and others,

Declares that, as the close neighbours of the development at 9B Westwood Road, Canvey Island, who are really the only ones directly affected by the issue, we support the building alterations and are happy for the new roof extension on the property to remain and do not feel that it destroys the street scene in any way and that it would be disproportionate to force the removal of the alterations.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to respect the views of those living in the surrounding houses and to approve the appeal.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000376]

Green Belt Development (Essex)

10.32 pm

Bob Spink: I shall move on to my second petition. I rise again in my long-standing battle to save our green belt, and this petition is one of the most important that I have ever had the privilege to present to Parliament. We must fight to stop building on Canvey's floodplains, school fields and green land, and to get the additional access road that is so desperately needed by Canvey people. People are not fools and they are deeply angry when councillors try to tell them that the wider community implicitly agrees with their plans to build on our green belt. That sort of spin and misrepresentation makes people immensely angry about political parties and politicians. I warmly congratulate and thank Graham and Linda Bracci, Debbie Walker, Cheryl Redwin, Bill and Marion Perkins, Jan Eagle, Kerri Thipthorpe and all the excellent people of Canvey island—it is an honour to represent them.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of Ashleigh Sharp and others,

Declares that building on Canvey's flood plain, school fields and green land is totally unacceptable and that what Canvey really needs is an additional access road from the Northwick area; welcomes the recent referendum which was professionally organised and conducted by Graham Bracci and others, taken over the last few weeks on Canvey Island, in which 6,534 people voted of whom 99.13 per cent. supported the motion that there should be

[Bob Spink]

no further development on Canvey Island greenbelt land; also welcomes the Constituency wide 'Save Castle Point Greenbelt' campaign which was launched by Bob Spink MP in March 2007 and the subsequent localised save the greenbelt campaigns such as that to stop development on Daws Heath; and notes the overwhelming view of Castle Point residents that their greenbelt should be protected and totally rejects the suggestion by Castle Point Councillors that residents implicitly agree with their Core Strategy plan to build on greenbelt.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Essex County and Castle Point Borough Councillors to respect the flood plain, rescind plans to sell off part of Castle View School playing field, protect Castle Point greenbelt in its core strategy and make the Canvey additional access road their priority.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000375]

Illegal Radio Broadcasts

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Claire Ward.)*

10.34 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): Three years ago, I first highlighted the dangers posed by illegal radio stations. The purpose of tonight's debate is to raise this issue in the House again and to highlight that, sadly, very little progress has been made in the last three years to establish a co-ordinated strategy to deal with illegal broadcasters; to increase the opportunities for community radio stations to satisfy unmet need in their neighbourhoods; and to address the serious problems caused by some illegal broadcasters whose activities show a wanton disregard for the well-being of others.

I use the terms "illegal radio stations" or "unlawful broadcasts", rather than "pirate stations", because of the nostalgic impression that the latter phrase implies. The recent Richard Curtis film, "The Boat that Rocked", brings to mind this buccaneering approach, with new and innovative unregulated stations challenging previous orthodoxies on music and the whole approach to broadcasting—the results of which form part of the style and sound of the commercial and BBC radio stations that we hear today.

In many ways, that historic view of what pirate or illegal radio stations were about is part of the issue. It implies that these stations were simply about breaking new boundaries, breaking the mould of popular culture and staying one step ahead of the regulators, who were out to stifle choice and new ways of doing things. In no way do I want to affect the vibrancy of radio as a medium or to stop the ability of communities to establish stations to meet the needs and interests of new listeners. I am a real enthusiast for radio and the power of the medium. Indeed, the primary reason for initiating this debate was the problems that my own community radio station in Havering, Link FM 102.2, has been suffering.

The reality of most of today's illegal radio stations, as contrasted with the pioneering pirates of the 1960s, could not be starker. According to Ofcom, the vast majority of these stations exist simply as illegal businesses that promote events at nightclubs and make significant sums of cash from advertising and from exploiting young MCs or DJs conned into paying out cash to take the mic and potentially put at risk their ability thereafter to work in the industry to which they aspire.

Some illegal stations have become linked to forms of serious criminal behaviour, with some illegal broadcasters being convicted for offences such as money laundering, drugs supply and firearms offences. The illegal stations are often operated with disregard for the health and safety of others, and cause significant disruption and damage to legitimate businesses that have paid significant sums of money to the Government in licence fees for radio frequencies that are in part unusable.

Illegal broadcasting by its very nature is entirely unregulated. It feels no prohibition on playing music that might glamorise gang violence or drug culture. It is accountable to no one for what it broadcasts. It abides by no programming codes on taste or decency and it operates without any regard for the consequences of what may be said on air. Pirate radio was thought to have triggered the Lozells riots in October 2005 by

inciting racial tensions in Birmingham by spreading false rumours that a black woman had been raped by Asian men. But there are many other ways in which illegal broadcasting can cause harm. Signals from illegal broadcasters can interfere with other radio systems, and when this happens to emergency and critical services it is particularly serious.

In the six months from April to September 2008, Ofcom field engineers investigated a total of 36 reports from emergency and critical services of interference that was directly attributable to illegal broadcasters. The large majority of those complaints were from the fire service and National Air Traffic Services. Some recent examples given to me by Ofcom include the following. On 1 April 2009, NATS contacted Ofcom, complaining of interference affecting aircraft using Heathrow airport. The source of the interference was an illegal broadcaster, Laylow FM. Ofcom officials traced the source and a transmitter was seized from the roof of a high-rise block in west London. On Friday 15 May 2009, NATS again reported interference affecting aircraft in the area of Heathrow, which was traced to Flames FM and Millennium Supreme FM, which were both traced to the same high-rise block in Bow in east London. Both stations were taken off air. On Thursday 20 May 2009, NATS reported serious interference to five of its locations around London. This interference was large scale and the source was one illegal broadcaster, Flames FM. The station was again taken off air by Ofcom officials.

The London fire brigade has told Ofcom that it suffers radio interference from illegal radio broadcasts on average once every two weeks. When this occurs, control room staff are unable to make contact with crews en route to an emergency, which means that the effective co-ordination of such operations is diminished. When its control centre suffers from such interference and is unable to receive messages from crews at one site only, it has the ability to inhibit receivers at that site. That is a short-term measure and reduces overall coverage across London.

Significant damage to public property can be caused by illegal broadcasters when installing and maintaining their apparatus. Some local authorities are reported to be paying more than £250,000 a year on repairing damage and securing roof spaces, but such activities also have a human side. Concerned residents and officials who challenge the activities of illegal broadcasters—often the caretakers and others responsible for the safety and maintenance of estates—are threatened with physical violence or suffer intimidation.

In one example provided by Ofcom from last year, two of its officials were confronted by two men after they disconnected the transmitter of an illegal broadcast station in Haringey and were threatened with a knife. Some illegal broadcasters locate their equipment in private dwellings, taking advantage of vulnerable people or using coercion. Damage may be caused to locked roof access doors, creating further risk of harm with the possibility of children being able to access dangerous environments—not to mention the booby-trapping of equipment.

An illegal broadcaster will identify a slot in the FM broadcasting band. It will then locate its transmitter on high ground, usually on the roof of a local authority building, typically a residential tower block. The transmitters are crude in construction and are not electronically safe. To feed the transmitter, the illegal broadcaster will tap into the building's power supply, often by diverting electricity from the lift motor room with consequential safety issues. The equipment has also been known to be secured with live mains electricity applied to roof access doors and sharp objects such as razor blades, syringe needles and broken glass secured to roof access ladders.

There is a misconception that the people behind illegal radio stations are just enthusiasts with an interest in music and broadcasting. Some claim that they break the law because they want to serve a community need. There are a minority for whom that might be true, but the truth is that the majority of illegal broadcasters are motivated by money. Set-up costs are minimal. A transmitter costs around £350 and a good-quality studio can be assembled for £3,000. Revenue comes from two sources. Many DJs pay to broadcast on illegal radio stations in an attempt to gain public exposure. Predominantly young people, most DJs are exploited by station managers who will charge them up to £20 per hour for the chance to appear on air. Illegal radio stations also receive income from selling advertising, often publicising events at nightclubs.

The rewards can be significant. Some of these well-organised criminal businesses are generating as much as £250,000 in cash a year, going into the unlawful, untaxed economy. That puts into context why people in the radio industry regard current court fines following convictions for unlawful radio broadcast offences as utterly derisory. Last year these fines averaged just £486, with offences being treated like TV licensing offences.

Ofcom estimates that there are around 150 illegal broadcasters in the UK, with more than 60 per cent. operating in London. At any one time it is believed that up to 90 illegal broadcasters are transmitting in London. I want to pay tribute to Ofcom for the work it does in taking enforcement action against the illegal broadcasters. Last year, Ofcom conducted 525 separate operations. Ofcom staff have developed close working relationships with specialised areas of the police service, such as elements of the Serious Organised Crime Agency, the regional asset recovery teams and the National Policing Improvement Agency.

Ofcom staff work with affected local authorities and housing associations as well as the mobile phone operators whose masts are sometimes targeted as a location for main transmitters of the illegal broadcasters. It is right that there should be a co-ordinated partnership approach given the need for preventive measures, the serious crime issues, the health and safety implications, the cost for local government and other governmental agencies and the fact that enforcement alone will not provide a longer-term solution to the menace of the illegal broadcasters.

That was why I asked various parliamentary questions to a number of Departments to establish how well the Government were responding to the issues. Despite what Ofcom has reported on the links to serious criminality, the Home Office told me that it was

"unaware of a linkage between illegal radio broadcasting and serious organised criminality." —[*Official Report*, 19 January 2009; Vol. 486, c. 1234W.]

[James Brokenshire]

Despite the risks set out by Ofcom on the damage caused to social housing blocks, the Department of Communities and Local Government told me:

"We have not made any assessment of the health and safety risk to social housing tenants caused by equipment installed for the purposes of illegal radio broadcasts."—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2008; Vol. 482, c. 341W.]

Despite the potential disruption of air traffic control signals guiding airliners over our heads, the Department of Transport was content to respond:

"NATS, the leading air navigation services provider, is a private company and questions concerning the extent of disruption to its air traffic control services should be directed to the company's chief executive."—[*Official Report*, 11 November 2008; Vol. 482, c. 955W.]

Those responses do not inspire confidence that a longer-term, sustained and joined-up approach to the problems posed by the illegal stations will be created.

Will the Minister commit to work with other Departments to highlight the risks associated with illegal radio broadcasts? Will he discuss with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport the potential for exploring whether there are any other ways of using the existing FM spectrum more effectively to address unmet community needs, and whether the existing regulatory regime, which is based on promises of performance, remains fit for purpose in promoting choice and diversity in broadcast output?

Will the Minister also confirm with DCMS the effect of illegal broadcasts on the fledgling community radio sector? It is somewhat ironic that community stations, which have greater flexibility in their programming output and greater scope to meet a broader range of interests—in many ways they are intended to meet the desires for aspiring radio talent—should be the worst affected by the impact of the illegal stations. I know that my community station, Link FM, has struggled to attract advertising when its broadcasts over its small area have been disrupted and often blocked out by a pirate squatting on an adjacent frequency.

Will the Minister discuss with his colleagues in the Ministry of Justice the possibility for community punishments or other sanctions being made available for breaches of the Wireless Telegraphy Acts, instead of relying on fines that do not appear to offer any meaningful sanctions? I have been encouraged by Ofcom's work with law enforcement on using proceeds of crime recovery powers. Will the Minister ask his officials to explore whether any similar powers or sanctions might be utilised, such as antisocial behaviour orders and other injunctive relief?

I appreciate that the Minister has a lot of other pressing items and priorities on his desk, but this issue is causing harm, exploiting the vulnerable and potentially putting people at risk. I hope that it will not take another three years until a more co-ordinated, meaningful and effective approach is brought to bear on a problem that is simply not going away.

10.47 pm

The Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs (Mr. Pat McFadden): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) on securing this debate on an issue in which he has a long-standing interest. As he said, he secured an Adjournment debate on the matter three years ago and he has tabled several parliamentary questions. The issue is of interest to several hon. Members. For example, the Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Claire Ward), who is in the Chamber, has raised it with me because her community radio station's frequency is regularly occupied by illegal stations. In my capacity of a constituency MP, I know the value of community radio stations such as Link FM, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and Wolverhampton Community Radio, which does an absolutely excellent job for my city.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, in any debate about illegal or pirate radio, there is a temptation to be wistful about the days of Radio Caroline and to pay tribute to the free spirit and early creativity of pirate radio. That temptation might be stronger when a popular film that celebrates that era is out, as is the case at the moment. However, as he said, comparisons between then and now do not stand up to scrutiny. Back then, there was little choice for the listener and unlicensed radio was often the only way to hear much of the music of the time. Today, however, that is not the case, as there are hundreds of radio stations throughout the country. The digital revolution is making setting up legitimate radio stations and getting them licensed ever easier, so the point about choice can no longer be argued. The issues surrounding pirate radio—or illegal radio, as he called it—are very different from those that existed in the 1960s. Today, pirate radio undermines legitimate radio. It can be used as a cover for more serious crimes, and the act of setting up a pirate radio station can have a damaging effect on people's quality of life. In other words, pirate radio is a serious issue and it is taken seriously by the Government.

My Department, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, has policy responsibility for the radio spectrum and the legislation from which Ofcom, the independent regulator, derives its powers. Those powers come from the Communications Act 2003 and the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006. Ofcom's duties include ensuring the efficient use of the spectrum and minimising harmful interference. My ministerial colleague Lord Stephen Carter, the founding chief executive of Ofcom, takes the lead on spectrum issues for my Department. He has a great deal of expertise on the issue. He cares passionately about it, and he tells me that in his past life, he took part in a raid with police officers to close down precisely the kind of illegal station that the hon. Member for Hornchurch mentioned.

I want to go through some of the damaging effects of such stations. The first that I want to highlight is the damaging effect on the many excellent legitimate local radio stations around the country; we have mentioned a couple of them. The founders of those radio stations have gone through the process of getting a licence. They have done the hard work of building up an audience. They are funded by the licence fee, in the case of BBC local radio, or through hard-won advertising revenue, yet they find that their signals are blocked by illegal stations that have done none of that work. That not only frustrates the listener, who cannot hear the station that they want to, but can hit the income of the station through loss of advertising revenue, as advertisers will be reluctant to spend money if they think that the delivery of the service is patchy and unreliable. Sometimes a whole borough can be knocked out of reception.

The commercial effect is deeply damaging, but there is an even more serious aspect, which the hon. Gentleman highlighted: interference with blue-light emergency services and air traffic control. When someone calls the fire brigade or the police, we want the most reliable communications possible. We want nothing to stand in the way of the emergency services knowing where the problem is, and getting there as fast as possible. Of course we do not want interference with critical air traffic control communication. Pirate radio can interfere with those vital services, so its operation is not just a matter of commercial damage; there is also an issue of public safety. The figure that the hon. Gentleman gave of 36 cases reported to him by Ofcom in just six months last year shows that we are not talking about a theoretical scare, but about a real danger.

The hon. Gentleman was right to point out the damaging impact that pirate stations have on their immediate local environment. There are issues affecting tower blocks, and there can be a loss of power supply to lifts, and damage to buildings. Sometimes the installations are guarded with glass, syringes and other things that create a danger for those trying to enforce the law. When people go to those lengths, we should not be surprised that illegal broadcasting can sometimes be linked to other illegal behaviour. In one case a few years ago, an illegal broadcaster had his studio raided, and at the police station was found to be in possession of a loaded firearm. He was eventually sentenced to a lengthy prison term.

The chief responsibility for stopping the proliferation of illegal radio stations lies with Ofcom, which derives its power for spectrum allocation and use in the UK from the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006. It is inevitably difficult to say exactly how many pirate stations there are; they are, by their nature, being set up and closed down all the time. Ofcom estimates that there are about 150 illegal broadcasters, most of them concentrated in the London area. Ofcom aims to reduce interference by sending out a strong message that illegal broadcasters will suffer consequences. It uses a range of criteria to determine when to act, including the size of the area of the broadcast and the volume of complaints. When an issue could endanger lives, Ofcom obviously and rightly treats it as a matter of priority for investigation and action.

As for penalties, an illegal broadcaster can receive up to two years in prison, an unlimited fine or both. Anyone convicted of an offence is barred from working for a legitimate station for five years. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fines, and I want to address that point directly. It is for Parliament to set the legal framework of punishment. I have just set out the maximum punishments, but it is always for the courts to apply those penalties as they see fit. One of the problems of challenging illegal stations is that we might be able to get to those operating the equipment at the time, but it might be a much more difficult task for the authorities to get to whoever may be behind them. The person operating the equipment, their income and their employment status will be taken into account by the court. That in part explains the level of fines that are levied.

Ofcom obtained authority under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 to access data about telephone, e-mail and internet communications and to undertake covert surveillance. In May this year it was added to the list of law enforcement agencies that are empowered to conduct financial investigations under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. These extra powers may give Ofcom a greater capacity to get behind those who are operating the station at the time of the raid.

James Brokenshire: I thank the Minister for his constructive reply. On sanctions, he made the point well about the assessment of needs and the ability to level fines. I suggested to him that other mechanisms might be explored—a different sort of sanction, such as community punishment. Will the right hon. Gentleman consider discussing with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice whether that route can be explored so that there is perceived to be a meaningful sanction rather than a fine which, I understand, in many cases may go unpaid?

Mr. McFadden: As I said, other options are already available to the courts, but they will select the penalty on the basis of some of the factors that I cited.

With reference to resources, last year Ofcom spent £1.5 million on enforcement. It undertook 525 separate operations against illegal broadcasters, resulting in 28 convictions. Those included the seizure of transmitters, disconnection of transmitters' aerials, and raids on studios. When there are convictions, the courts are responsible for punishment within the limits set by Parliament.

It is not true to say that the issue is not taken seriously by the Government or Ofcom, but there is a difficult truth. As the hon. Gentleman said, it is relatively cheap and simple to set up illegal radio stations. No matter how much resource is put into tackling the problem, the regulator inevitably faces a tough battle in trying to control the numbers. Despite these difficulties, tough punishments can be levied. Let us take the example of Lightning FM.

In December 2007, the owner of a south London illegal radio station, Lightning FM, appeared at Inner London Crown court convicted of two counts of money laundering and two counts of managing an illegal broadcast station. For the money laundering offences he received 10 months' imprisonment, and for the illegal broadcast offences another 10 months. A financial investigation under the Proceeds of Crime Act was then conducted and the person was ordered to pay £375,000 to the court within 12 months. Should he fail to pay within the time, the individual will serve a default prison sentence of no less than four years, and action will be taken to recover the money owed.

I understand what the hon. Gentleman says about fines, but where there is a link to other illegal activity, significant sentences can be imposed. The issue is not for Ofcom alone, but for a number of agencies. I spoke today to the head of spectrum enforcement at Ofcom in advance of the debate. He told me that the Government's introduction of safer neighbourhood policing teams has helped significantly in co-ordinating the work between the police and Ofcom on the issue. So developments have taken place since the hon. Gentleman's debate three years ago, which make it easier for the agencies to work together. Ofcom has developed close relationships with the Serious Organised Crime Agency, regional asset recovery teams and other agencies. Following the hon. Gentleman's previous debate, one of my predecessors

[Mr. McFadden]

in the Department held a specially convened meeting with a number of agencies to help to co-ordinate that activity, too. Ofcom has also negotiated service level agreements in a variety of police sectors throughout London, enabling staff to purchase police support.

In the past, pirate radio stations may have had a role in nurturing talent and in ensuring that minority tastes were properly catered for but, for the reasons that I have set out, it is much more difficult to argue that case today. Now, such stations are much more harmful. They can even be dangerous and, critically, as technology changes and the digital revolution unfolds, there is less need for them than ever before. My Department is working on its "Digital Britain" report, a key part of which will involve extending access to legitimate creative people who want to establish radio stations. The question that will be asked much more frequently in the future is: why is there a need for such stations, unless it is for some motive far less high-minded than musical creativity and choice? That is why the Government and Ofcom will continue to take enforcement seriously.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate tonight, and I am sure that those Departments other than my own to which he referred, such as the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, will take account of his comments. He is absolutely right to say that we must work together throughout Government to tackle what is a serious issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 2 June 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Non-Domestic Rate (Small Businesses)

1. **Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effects of the transitional arrangements for the national non-domestic rate on small businesses in (a) London and (b) Northamptonshire in 2009-10. [277598]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Hazel Blears): No formal consideration is made of the effect of the transitional relief scheme in each financial year, but the Government are aware of the impact that large increases in business rate bills can have on all businesses when the transitional rate relief comes to an end. That is why we are allowing businesses to defer, over two years, 60 per cent. of the increase in their business rates bill for 2009-10 caused by the ending of transitional relief. That is in addition to allowing the deferral of 60 per cent. of the increase caused by the annual inflation adjustment.

Mr. Hollobone: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the business rates deferral scheme will start to take effect from the end of July and will she give a commitment that the new costs incurred by local authorities in sending out the new bills will be fully funded by central Government?

Hazel Blears: Yes, I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that he is correct on both counts.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): With 41 businesses now going insolvent every day, the decision by Ministers to withdraw transitional relief has been taken in a totally fact-free zone. No assessment was made of how withdrawing the relief in the first place would hurt businesses. Two months after the decision to introduce the business rate deferral scheme, Ministers have still not calculated the cost of the scheme to local authorities nor assessed its impact on businesses. Is the Secretary of State still going ahead with the next big challenge for businesses, the 2010 revaluation, and will that decision be taken in a fact-free zone too, with no account taken of the impact on businesses, communities and jobs?

Hazel Blears: The hon. Lady is in a knowledge-free zone. She has failed to acknowledge the tremendous help that the Government have given to businesses. The help includes the small business rate relief—nearly 400,000 businesses have taken advantage of the 50 per cent. relief, which was opposed by the Opposition—the deferral of 60 per cent. of the retail prices index increase, the deferral of 60 per cent. of the transitional element, and the deferral of tax and VAT for more than 100,000 businesses. That is what real help is, and I am afraid that the hon. Lady is not even on the playing field.

Regional Spatial Strategies

2. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What the timetable is for further reviews of regional spatial strategies. [277599]

The Minister for Housing (Margaret Beckett): Regional spatial strategies have been published for all regions, with the exception of the south-west, where we expect to publish shortly, and the west midlands, which is currently holding an examination in public. All regional planning bodies have agreed timetables for further reviews, and I have put details in the Library.

John Howell: Will the Minister not admit that she has made a mistake and that instead of revising regional spatial strategies, she should be abolishing them and their unsustainable and undemocratic approach to the UK housing market?

Margaret Beckett: No, I think that would be a disastrous course of action. The Opposition have said a lot of sweeping things about there being no need for a regional tier of consideration or decision making, but one of the reasons this Government implemented such proposals is because of representations that we received from across the country, including from the business community in particular, about the gap that existed in our decision-making procedures when there was no regional tier.

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): In the current economic climate, the aspiration to build 3 million new houses by 2020 looks ambitious. In the review of regional plans, will the Minister recognise the pent-up demand for housing that still exists and commit herself to development, in the east midlands and elsewhere, on brownfield sites rather than on greenfield sites?

Margaret Beckett: First, my hon. Friend is entirely right. I hope that everyone in the House recognises the tremendous pent-up demand that exists for new housing and the serious social and economic problems that would be caused if we could not do more to address it. I also entirely accept his other point, although he will know that this Government have a strong record of construction on brownfield sites. I accept completely that that is much the most desirable way, and we will continue to try to pursue it.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): In the determination to move government closer to the people, what was the deciding factor in moving planning strategy from one unelected quango to another?

Margaret Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman is referring, as I think he is, to the proposals currently before the House, may I inform him that what we are basically trying to do is streamline and simplify the system? He will have many opportunities to make his contribution on those issues as the Bill proceeds through the House. However, I am sure that he will know that there is a strong element of participation by local authorities; perhaps I could therefore remind the Opposition, who sometimes seem to forget this, that the members of those authorities are elected.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Is it my right hon. Friend's intention that the spatial strategies will respect the Government's target for new house building on brownfield sites, as measured at the local government level, not the regional level?

Margaret Beckett: It is certainly our hope that people everywhere across the country will take account of that approach, which is obviously the most desirable from every point of view. My hon. Friend will appreciate that sometimes there are greater difficulties in finding suitable sites that meet those criteria, but the Government certainly retain that approach, and we will encourage local authorities to do so too.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): But why should anyone believe what the right hon. Lady says when she talks about building only on brownfield sites? She will know that many of the eco-towns proposed by her predecessor were going to be built on greenfield sites. Does she not accept that there needs to be a balance between the urgent need for extra housing and maintaining the rural environment?

Margaret Beckett: Of course I accept that; I do not think that anyone would dispute it. I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that the reason that people should believe what we say about brownfield sites is that the Government have delivered—in fact, more than delivered—on our targets for brownfield sites. We have had many discussions in the House about the proposals for eco-towns, and he is correct to say that some of those proposals involved greenfield development. They involve a variety of types of development, and we shall return to that issue later in the year.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Yesterday, the Prime Minister admitted on Radio 4 that people felt powerless and that politics was not as accountable as it should be. Was there any point at which the right hon. Lady felt that he might have been referring to the unelected, unaccountable regional spatial strategies, which ride roughshod over local communities?

Margaret Beckett: That is certainly not the case. I am sure that is not what the Prime Minister meant, not least because—as I reminded the Opposition a moment ago—there will be very strong local authority involvement and representation in the new bodies that will consider the proposals. They are, as I have said, elected.

Mrs. Spelman: But does the right hon. Lady not understand that local government involvement and participation is no good if it is overridden? Unelected regional bureaucrats arbitrarily doubling or trebling the number of homes that local authorities have offered to build on a sustainable basis gives people a feeling of being completely disempowered and confirms their sense that the only way to get a change in politics is to get a change of Government.

Margaret Beckett: I think that the hon. Lady is subtly trying to work round to the proposals that have been put forward by her party, in which, instead of having overall targets that recognise the substantial unmet housing demand identified a moment ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Paddy Tipping), we should somehow let a thousand flowers bloom and thereby allow local authorities to build up to meet the housing need. I would simply say to her that I have read with great care the many comments on her party's proposals, and that I note with interest and some amusement that many official bodies have said, "What a fascinating idea. We look forward with great interest to hearing from the Conservative party how it can possibly deliver housing."

Housing Revenue Account

3. **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What recent representations she has received on the future of the housing revenue account subsidy system. [277605]

The Minister for Housing (Margaret Beckett): Since the launch of the joint review of council housing finance with the Treasury in March 2008, we have received position papers from key organisations in the sector, approximately 45 written submissions in response to our call for evidence, papers from a number of housing experts and four petitions. We have also received direct representations in face-to-face meetings with housing representative bodies, local authorities and trade unions.

David Taylor: Despite our pledge to get councils building again, they are doing so at a rate of only about 200 homes a year, although registered social landlords are completing something like 20,000, suggesting a continuing bias against local authorities providing decent, affordable, accountable new homes for rent. Will my right hon. Friend grasp this once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform seriously flawed housing revenue accounts by announcing a self-financing system in which councils can keep their own rents, reinvest surpluses in existing and new stock and have the same freedom as housing associations to access grant and loans for much-needed new developments?

Margaret Beckett: I entirely share my hon. Friend's concern about the barriers that had been put in the way of local government's freedom to provide housing for its local communities by the Conservatives when they were last in government. I can assure him, however, that we are in the last stages of removing those barriers and that local authorities will be able to bid for grant. They will have the special opportunity that was made available to them in the Budget of accessing funds reserved for local authorities, but they will also have an opportunity to bid for social grant on the same basis as housing associations and other bodies.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): Back in January, the Prime Minister said that he would

"put aside any of the barriers that stand in the way of"

local authorities providing more housing. The right hon. Lady has mentioned the money announced in the Budget, but that equates to only three homes per authority. Is it not time to acknowledge that the real barrier is the housing revenue account subsidy? Why are the results of the review so overdue? In the current economic climate, surely what we need is swift action, rather than further delay.

Margaret Beckett: As I pointed out a moment ago to my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), we are removing the last of the barriers that obstruct local authorities. I share what I deduce to be the hon. Lady's hope, which I hope in turn is shared across the House, that local authorities of every political shade will take advantage of this opportunity to begin greater construction. I also understand her point about the structure of the housing revenue account. The review has not, actually, been massively delayed—we had hoped that it would report in the spring, and we now hope that it will do so this summer—but I fully recognise that there are many criticisms of the present system and that they have a great deal of validity. While I very much hope that we will be able to come forward with radical proposals for change that will attract support across the parties, I am conscious of the unwarrantable precedent of the poll tax, whereby it was thought that anything would be better than the then system. Unless we can come up with anything better than the present system, we may have to tinker with that.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be aware of the uncertain feelings that managers of arm's length management organisations are experiencing at the moment. Since the stock is still owned by councils, will she please tell the House when it will be announced that those ALMOs are going to have a certain future ahead of them?

Margaret Beckett: I cannot put a date on the particular concerns that my hon. Friend raises and I recognise, of course, that there are, sadly, a plethora of uncertainties about some of these issues. We will certainly do our best to resolve them as speedily as possible, and if it is helpful, I will write to him if any further information becomes available.

Mr. Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Last year, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee reported:

"The national Housing Revenue Account system creates uncertainty and resentment and does not reward best practice."

We are now 18 months into the Government's review of the HRA. When can we expect a conclusion to the review—one that is fair, that supports local autonomy and that will increase the provision of much-needed social housing across the whole country?

Margaret Beckett: It is not 18 months, but never mind. I told the House a few moments ago that we hope to publish some proposals this summer. I fully recognise the justified criticisms of the present system, particularly the volatility and the unfairness, but I view with slight cynicism some of the criticisms we have heard from some Conservative local authorities, which were perfectly happy with the surpluses built up—four and more times the size of last year's—when the Conservative Government were in power. We will put that aside and welcome their conversion to a better approach.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

4. **Dr. Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): What progress her Department has made towards implementing those proposals it accepted from the ECOTEC report on houses in multiple occupation. [277601]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): Following on from the research work undertaken by ECOTEC, the Department published on 13 May a consultation paper on houses in multiple occupation and possible planning responses.

Dr. Blackman-Woods: I thank the Minister for that response and, indeed, for his interest in this subject. He will know that my constituents would like the local authority to have more tools to control the amount of private renting and HMOs in some areas. Will he tell us when proposals to license all private landlords and to alter use classes orders relating to HMOs will be put before the House?

Mr. Wright: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has done a great deal of work in this sector, not least in her role as chair of the all-party group on balanced and sustainable communities. She has really cajoled me and other Ministers in that respect. On her point about the powers available to local authorities, I have to say that she and her constituents are being badly let down by the City of Durham council, but I believe that the new unitary authority for Durham county will do an awful lot better. Powers are available in the Housing Act 2004 to enable local authorities to exercise control on the basis of evidence of antisocial behaviour. Our consultation on use classes orders and aligning housing and planning definitions of HMOs will end on 7 August. We look forward subsequently to consulting the House on that.

Business Rate Liabilities

5. **Mr. Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): When she plans to bring forward legislation to give effect to the planned partial deferral of business rate liabilities in 2009-10. [277602]

The Minister for Local Government (John Healey): We are preparing the regulations now, we will introduce them as soon as possible and they will be in place and in effect by the end of July.

Mr. Harper: Assuming that the regulations are introduced and pass into law before the summer recess, may I point out that all that they do is defer the payment? Will the Minister explain in a little more detail why he decided against supporting the Small Business Rate Relief (Automatic Payment) Bill, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff), which would have enabled all eligible small businesses to halve their rate bills?

John Healey: We wanted to deal with a bigger problem. The retail prices index meant a 5 per cent. increase in the rates bills of every business, not just small businesses, and there was a particular problem for businesses that experienced the end of the transitional relief for this year. Given the current economic circumstances and the pressure that people are under, we wanted to help them to manage their cash flow and manage this increase by allowing them to pay a lower level of increase this year and spread the payments over the following two years. That is why we are introducing the regulations, and that is why they have been welcomed by business organisations.

Traveller Sites

6. **Mr. John Baron** (Billericay) (Con): What assistance her Department will provide in identifying publicly owned land for use as a transit site by Traveller families facing eviction from the unauthorised site at Dale Farm. [277694]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Sadiq Khan): It is for Basildon council to manage the process of managing the unauthorised development at Dale Farm. If and when it decides to proceed with eviction action, I expect the council to hold talks with neighbouring authorities to ensure that any eviction that takes place does so in a calm and orderly fashion.

Mr. Baron: The Minister will be aware that the 85 Traveller families at the illegal site have now exhausted their legal and planning options. The council rightly seeks to reclaim the unauthorised site and return it to the green belt. It hopes to avoid a forced eviction, as we all do. I know that the Minister does as well. The ball is now in the Travellers' court, and they have to move off peacefully if that is to happen. However, as the Minister will know, there is a shortage of sites.

Given the scale of the problem and given that the Government are partly responsible for it, having granted the Travellers two years' leave to remain—during which time the number of caravans on the site shot up—will the Minister do what he can to help to identify transit sites outside the district, as Basildon has done more than its fair share locally? Will he also meet me to discuss this important issue?

Mr. Khan: I understand the concern felt by the hon. Gentleman's constituents about the friction caused by the unauthorised development and the problems that it has caused for the settled community, but he was present during yesterday's debate, and will have heard Conservative Front Benchers criticise the Government for trying to work in partnership with local authorities and complaining about the fact that authorities are not given autonomy and power to solve problems.

I told the hon. Gentleman a few moments ago that it was for Basildon council to work with neighbouring authorities. He is now telling me that he does not think it will be able to do so, and that he wants me to intervene and help. I am happy to meet him and discuss with him ways in which he feels that his local authority may need assistance, but it is worth my reminding him of the contradiction between what was said by his party's Front Benchers yesterday and what he is asking for today.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): May I also ask my hon. Friend to do his utmost to find a solution to the situation at Dale Farm, and to do anything that the Government are able to do? As I am sure he knows, yesterday we launched Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month here in Parliament. It was a huge celebration of Gypsy culture, and hundreds of Gypsies, Roma people and Travellers were here. Overlying everything, however, was the worry about the lack of sites.

Mr. Khan: My hon. Friend will be aware that one of the causes of the problems is the fact that large numbers of Traveller and Gypsy families are on unauthorised encampments and sites. We need to encourage local authorities to provide more and more authorised sites. There are pitches where Traveller and Gypsy families can go, which will lead to fewer of the problems described by the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron).

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am puzzled by the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) that the problem at Dale Farm could be solved by Basildon borough council. In relation to the problem in Wiltshire, he has said that not the elected Wiltshire county council but an entirely unelected, undemocratic quango, the South West regional assembly, must make the necessary decision. How do those two answers stack up?

Mr. Khan: I am always happy to lecture Opposition Members about the planning framework. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that local authorities assess Gypsy and Traveller accommodation needs, and that the results of those assessments are passed to a regional planning body which uses them to allocate pitches to authorities as part of the regional spatial strategy. The proposals are assessed during a public examination at which arguments can be advanced for raising or lowering the number of allocations. It is then for local authorities to draw up development plan documents to accommodate pitch allocations. I shall be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to explain how the planning framework operates.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): Unauthorised sites such as Dale Farm exist the length and breadth of the country. What measures are in place to assist local authorities, as it is they—and therefore taxpayers—who have to pick up the cost of clearing up the damage done to sites? What tangible legislative powers does my hon. Friend have to sort this out?

Mr. Khan: My hon. Friend asks a very important question. Last year, local authorities spent £18 million on enforcement action. There is a local authority in England which has authorised sites, and the cost of enforcement fell from £200,000 a year to £5,000. That is an example of authorised sites reducing the cost to local authorities, and also the huge distress caused to the settled community.

Mortgage Assistance Schemes

7. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): How many households have received assistance under the mortgage rescue scheme and homeowner mortgage support scheme. [277695]

The Minister for Housing (Margaret Beckett): Our objective is to ensure that repossession is always the last resort. The mortgage rescue scheme and homeowner mortgage support scheme are just part of a comprehensive package of measures that we have put in place to assist families at risk of losing their homes. The MRS has been operational across the country since 1 January 2009. Since its launch, local authorities have reported that more than 1,000 households each month have come forward and received guidance on what support may be best for their circumstances. Seventy-seven households are in the final stages of receiving assistance and have had repossession action against them frozen by their lenders. Two households have so far completed the Government mortgage-to-rent process, whereby a registered social landlord has agreed to purchase their property and enabled them to remain in their own home as tenants. We expect many more households to be helped in this way in the coming months.

The homeowner mortgage support scheme opened with the first group of lenders on 21 April. Official figures on the number of households entering the scheme will be published later this year, and we are working closely with lenders and money advisers to monitor progress and ensure that the scheme is working effectively.

Philip Davies: Well, there we have it. Since the Chancellor announced this scheme, a house has been repossessed every seven minutes, yet the scheme has helped only two families since it was launched. Is this not another example of the Government seeking publicity—in a blaze of glory—to pretend they are helping people when in reality they are failing to deliver any tangible help to people suffering hardship through no fault of their own?

Margaret Beckett: As I have just pointed out, thousands of households have approached the relevant authorities to seek advice. [Hon. Members: "Two."] Only two have completed the full process. I also pointed out that more than 70 households—77 to be precise—are now well on the way to receiving a formal offer, and I can also tell the House that a further 10, making 87 in all—*[Interruption.]* I am glad that Opposition Members find this so amusing; 87 households in all are now in the final stages of having a formal offer of assistance. That is 87 more households than received any help whatever under the Conservatives when they were last in government and when repossessions were taking place. They did not lift a finger. I am glad that they think it is funny that people are at risk of losing their homes, but I do not."

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that if Opposition Members were to consult the transcript of the proceedings of yesterday's Select Committee on Communities and Local Government and read the remarks of the Council of Mortgage Lenders on this scheme, they would, perhaps, moderate their mirth? The CML is broadly supportive of these two schemes, and it pointed out that the MRS had been extremely helpful in making sure that many more people at risk of repossession were now approaching their lenders at the outset and getting decent advice, instead of burying their head in the sand and waiting for things to hit them. That might be one of the reasons why relatively few of them are going through this entire system and requiring the MRS; instead, they are coming to an agreement with their lenders early on. If the demand is in fact lower than envisaged, will the Minister consider sending the money through for the building of more homes, instead of leaving it in a scheme that might not be required to the level that was originally thought?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and I agree that it would be wise for the Opposition to look carefully at the evidence that has been given to the Select Committee that she chairs. Opposition Members are so busy trying to be clever about this issue that they completely overlook the fact that, for everybody who is being considered for schemes of this kind, there is forbearance of action that could otherwise be taken against them that could lead to their homes being repossessed. One of the reasons we took the step of making the announcements that we did earlier in the year, which has been much criticised since by the Conservative party, was precisely to encourage people to go to their lenders and get advice at the earliest possible stage, instead of burying their heads in the sand. It is very clear from all the professional evidence that people believe that that has had a substantial effect.

The second effect that we hoped to achieve, which, again, seems perhaps to have come to fruition, was to get lenders to think more carefully about whether taking such as approach is worth their while—the suggestion is that repossessing a home costs a lender, on average, about £37,000. One of our chief aims was to convince lenders to consider the fact that for a lesser expenditure they might save all that misery and disruption to so many families. I am frankly appalled by the frivolous attitude of the Conservative party—I mean that quite sincerely, Mr. Speaker. It is a shattering blow to people when they lose their home—it is much harder than losing one's job and much harder to recover from.

On the mortgage rescue scheme, it appears that what is happening is that those who are coming through to the end of the scheme—I appreciate that the numbers are comparatively small on the official statistics—are agreeing to forgo their home ownership in order to stay on as tenants. That, in itself, is a major decision, so we should not be surprised that people are taking time to arrive at it.

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): The Minister will be aware that 75,000 families are expected to face the misery of repossession that she spoke about. Even if we were to add in all the package of measures to which she referred, tens of thousands of families would still be left facing that misery. Why then has she been unwilling to reform mortgage law—Shelter has consistently argued for this—so that we can give the courts the power to intervene? That would give the Government's pre-action protocol some decent teeth. Why is she unwilling to do that?

Margaret Beckett: I simply say to the hon. Lady that we believe that the pre-action protocol has been really quite effective. I appreciate the point she makes, which is that, sadly, many people could still lose their homes, but she may be aware that even in the best of years over the past decade or so—it was in 2004, as I recall—some 8,000 families lost their homes. There are a variety of reasons why people may find themselves in those devastating circumstances. She referred to the forecast of some 75,000 expected repossessions this year. That forecast came from the Council of Mortgage Lenders, but it has recently said that it now believes that, as a result of the action that this Government have taken, it has been too pessimistic. We certainly all hope that that is the case.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): To what extent have the banks, building societies and other lenders enthusiastically joined this rescue scheme?

Margaret Beckett: I cannot honestly say that everybody was enthusiastic, but the most important thing is that they have been willing to join. As my hon. Friend may know, 50 per cent. of the lenders in the marketplace have joined the home owners mortgage support scheme and taken advantage—or they could take advantage—of the Government's underlying guarantee. Although some major lenders did not feel that they needed to use that guarantee, 80 per cent. of mortgage lenders are, in fact, offering comparable schemes.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady agree that although these two schemes are both welcome, the process can be slow and bureaucratic? Will she undertake a review to see whether it might be streamlined?

Margaret Beckett: We are indeed keeping the schemes under review. The right hon. Gentleman may know that in the Budget we brought forward some extra funding, because early experience of the mortgage rescue scheme suggested that there was a greater problem with negative equity than had been anticipated. So, we have already made that change to the scheme and put forward the funding that will enable us to cover that. We are continuing to monitor how the schemes are developing because, obviously, as I said at the outset, our goal is to be as effective as possible in preventing repossessions, by whatever means.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the right hon. Lady understand that there is no amusement on this side of the House at the Government's situation, but there is a great deal of anger at their unwillingness to recognise the failure of these programmes, however well intended they might be, to deliver in practice? She neglected to tell the House that, of the 1,000 a month who register and express an interest in the mortgage rescue scheme, more than half are told that they do not qualify on the Government's own criteria. She neglected to say that on the current rate of progress the 6,000 who are supposed to be helped over the course of the scheme would, in fact, total about 12.

The Minister refers to the home owner mortgage support scheme. Would it not have been better if she had owned up to the fact that the 50 per cent. of mortgage lenders coming forward is fewer than the 70 per cent. that she said would come forward when the scheme was first trailed? Will she explain why major players such as Santander, Barclays, HSBC and Nationwide have all ruled out participation in the scheme? There is nothing amusing about this: indeed, the Government's failure is tragic, if not scandalous.

Margaret Beckett: The hon. Gentleman accuses me of misunderstanding the Opposition's approach. I admit that I was guilty of thinking that people who were roaring with laughter were finding something amusing.

What the hon. Gentleman says is straightforward nonsense, as he should be aware. He talks about a failure to deliver in practice and about the criteria for the scheme. If he has been paying any real attention to the schemes, he will know that the mortgage rescue scheme was only ever intended for some 6,000 families, and was geared towards the most vulnerable households who would be legally entitled to be rehoused by their local authority. That was all announced at the time. It was precisely because that scheme was funded only to deal with a small number of households that the Government then introduced the home owners mortgage support scheme, which is designed to deal with a much larger number—potentially tens of thousands—of households. All the strictures that the hon. Gentleman has levelled against the mortgage rescue scheme are therefore misplaced.

The hon. Gentleman suggests that Barclays, Nationwide and Santander are not participating, but he is wrong. They are offering comparable schemes and therefore have said that they do not see the necessity for the underpinning Government guarantee, and that is why they have not entered the guarantee scheme. They are certainly offering similar schemes, alongside our scheme, which they would not be offering were it not for the fact that this Government have urged them to enter our scheme. They do not need the support and that is why they have not come into that aspect of the scheme.

Home Information Packs

9. **James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend, East) (Con): What her latest assessment is of the effect of home information packs on the housing market; and if she will make a statement. [277607]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): Independent research into the impact of home information packs was undertaken by Europe Economics. The implementation of HIPs is being kept under review and an evaluation of the HIPs programme is currently planned for 2010 by updating "The HIPs Baseline Research Report".

James Duddridge: In another survey, 89 per cent. of professionals said that HIPs would not benefit buyers. In the age of rhetoric and of trusting professionals, why should we believe what the Government say, not the professionals?

Mr. Wright: I dispute what the hon. Gentleman says. Professionals are telling us that information is vital, and giving buyers information about probably the biggest purchase in their lives benefits the whole home buying and selling process. Roger Wilson of Connells, one of the country's largest estate agents, has said:

> "Knowledge is key when it comes to building confidence for any big purchase and prospective home buyers need to do their research and gather as much information as possible. The new PIQ, EPC and other elements of the Home Information Pack mean buyers will have more information about a home from the very first day it goes on the market."

Professionals are actually welcoming the HIP.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Professionals such as LMS in my constituency are proud of the work that they do in providing HIPs to many people. Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to say how he intends to continue his drive, after the review, to relieve the downward pressure on conveyancing by moving towards a system of electronic conveyancing?

Mr. Wright: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Electronic conveyancing can speed up the process hugely. We remain committed to ensuring that we can simplify and streamline the home buying and selling process. Some £1 million a week is wasted in abortive home purchases and sales, and that can cause heartache to the people involved and disruption to the economy, so we remain committed to HIPs. We want to provide information up front to allow buyers to make an informed choice.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): Further to the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (James Duddridge), will he guarantee that the review will include consultation with estate agents up and down the country to assess the level of demand from house buyers for home information packs and to assess the number of packs that have been produced but never used, and the cost involved? If the demand is extremely low, as I predict it will be, will he at least make them voluntary and not a statutory requirement?

Mr. Wright: No, we have no plans to make them a voluntary requirement. The hon. Lady touches on an important point. Sometimes, buyers and sellers—particularly buyers—do not get to see the HIP. That is not in anybody's interests. One key idea that we are trying to push forward, along with the industry, is that estate agents and others involved in the home buying and selling process should ensure that home buyers see the HIP. As I said in a previous answer, information is key. This is the biggest purchase that someone will make and it is important that home buyers get to see the home information pack and make informed choices accordingly.

Social Housing

11. **Christine Russell** (City of Chester) (Lab): What plans the Homes and Communities Agency has to increase the supply of social housing; and if she will make a statement. [277609]

The Minister for Housing (Margaret Beckett): We have announced a series of measures over the past 12 months designed to improve delivery of social rented housing in the current difficult market conditions, including a £1 billion housing package in the Budget, focused on maintaining activity and jobs, and further help for those who need it in the short term. We remain committed to the delivery of affordable housing for social rent and low-cost home ownership and we are assessing delivery and targets with the HCA as part of its corporate plan process.

Christine Russell: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. In my constituency, there are 26 applicants for every social housing vacancy. The Homes and Communities Agency has made a good start in giving £12 million to the Chester and district housing trust to build 350 homes, but 3,500 homes are needed. What more can she and the agency do to put pressure on the banks and building societies to make borrowing affordable for housing associations?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Perhaps I can direct her to the evidence given yesterday to the Select Committee, which will be published. Questions were asked about housing associations' capacity to raise funding. Although there is general recognition of their concerns about the loans that lenders are making available, it appears that the situation is easing to some degree. I share her anxieties and can assure her that we keep this matter under review.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): The Minister's hon. Friend, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), recently gave an interview to that excellent newspaper the *Leicester Mercury*, in which he commented on social housing, in particular with regard to Pembury and the proposed eco-town. Is he aware that, with or without social housing, local feeling is entirely opposed to the proposal to build a huge town on a greenfield site? Frankly, I wish that the Government would stop backing that plan and that Ministers would stop interfering in Leicestershire's affairs.

Margaret Beckett: Yes, I am aware of that, as I see people waving placards and shouting on regional television. I say to the hon. Gentleman that I hope that this summer we will have some news for his constituents and others about progress in this matter.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): Will the Minister do her best to ensure that the agency secures rapid delivery of affordable socially rented homes, to get people out of private rented accommodation where landlords are making a killing at the public expense through the housing benefits system? Will she also ensure that houses that are built or bought are appropriate, particularly for two very needy groups—large families and single people, who often do not get any social housing options whatsoever?

Margaret Beckett: I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that I know that the HCA shares the concerns that he has expressed, as do the Government. The agency met its targets last year, even in the present difficult economic circumstances, and will be using the funding put forward in the Budget to the best possible effect to build more housing, which is much needed, as fast as possible.

Decent Homes Programme

12. **Mr. Ken Purchase** (Wolverhampton, North-East) (Lab/Co-op): How much expenditure her Department has incurred on its decent homes programme since 1997. [277610]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): Between 1997-98 and 2008-09, the overall capital sum provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government and its predecessor Departments for capital investment in council-owned housing stock was £25.8 billion.

Mr. Purchase: I thank the Minister for that reply, but does he not agree with me and many others in this place and elsewhere who say that if the fourth option had been agreed to, the sum would have been spent more efficiently, effectively and quickly, and to the greater benefit of our tenants and certainly taxpayers, who, of course, ultimately own the housing stock?

Mr. Wright: But I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree with me that when we came to power in 1997, there was a backlog of about £19 billion in council house maintenance and repairs. We have had to do something about that. One of the true successes of this Government has been the massive investment in a whole generation of social housing. He is right to say that local authorities have a key role to play, and not only in providing the broad strategic assessment of what housing is needed in their area; they have a direct delivery role. In answers to previous questions, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing has said that we are removing disincentives for local authorities, providing additional money in the Budget and elsewhere, and making sure that councils start building council houses again.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): The decent homes initiative has transformed social housing in my constituency, but my hon. Friend is aware that the losers among residents are leaseholders who have bought properties that are now subject to major works bills, in some cases of £60,000—works that, in many cases, the leaseholders are totally unable to pay for. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he is, once again, urgently reviewing whether special, targeted help can be given to leaseholders who have, through no fault of their own, ended up owing bills of tens of thousands of pounds?

Mr. Wright: I am very sympathetic with regard to the scenario that my hon. Friend sets out. She has played a wonderful role in hassling me to death, frankly, on the issue—and she was right to do so. It is important to ensure that we provide targeted help. There is a range of powers in place. The Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 provided interest-free loans and deferred payments for leaseholders in the situation that she describes, but I am continuing to look at the issue, and I will keep her informed.

Topical Questions

T2. [277624] **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Hazel Blears): My Department continues to work to devolve power to councils, communities and citizens; to build strong, cohesive communities; to build new homes where people want to live and bring up their families; and to prevent violent extremism.

Mrs. Ellman: I applaud my right hon. Friend's strong stand against extremism. Does she share my concern about the fact that al-Muhajiroun has regrouped under different names, and about the fact that on 1 March this year, Islam for the UK held an event at a Harrow primary school that featured a live link with the banished Omar Bakri Muhammad? What assurances can she give me that public facilities will not be used to promote extremism in such a way in the future?

Hazel Blears: I entirely share my hon. Friend's concern about the activities of extremist groups. I am aware of a number of groups that have used council premises in places including Ealing and Tower Hamlets. Some of the councils concerned have very courageously taken steps to ensure that those groups are banned from their premises on the ground that their activities seek to divide communities. I can also confirm to my hon. Friend that my Department is in contact with those local authorities to support them in making the right decisions to bring our communities together, and not to divide them with the views of extremists.

T6. [277628] **Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South) (Con): May I raise with the Secretary of State an issue that I have raised before—the recognition of pigeon racing as a sport? Of course, the significance as far as her Department is concerned, is that if it is not a sport, pigeon-racing premises have to pay business rates. She may not be aware that the application of the Royal Pigeon Racing Association for pigeon racing to become a sport has been rejected by Sport England. Will she, on behalf of the pigeon fanciers of Croydon and Salford, join me in supporting an appeal, so that our pigeon fanciers can get the deal that they deserve?

Hazel Blears: As I remember, the last time the hon. Gentleman raised the issue he had a particular fanciable pigeon in mind; I have forgotten its name. I can say to him that I did personally take up the issue and found out why pigeon racing was not defined as a sport. Apparently it is because the owners do not take part in any physical activity. *[Laughter.]* If they ran behind the pigeons, it could be a sport. In terms of empowering the pigeon fanciers, perhaps I can suggest to him that they might like to draw up a petition, so that we can see whether we can take action on the issue.

T3. [277625] **Liz Blackman** (Erewash) (Lab): What progress has Derbyshire county council made in meeting its local area agreement targets in the light of the credit crunch?

The Minister for Local Government (John Healey): We undertook a first annual review through the Government office in January, and Derbyshire is making good progress in meeting the priorities that it set itself. The first full independent assessment will be carried out in Derbyshire, as elsewhere, in November. Derbyshire has set itself five important economic priorities, on which it is working and making progress. It has also led a response locally, which is very impressive, helping to make sure that businesses receive the business relief that they deserve; that welfare claimants receive the benefits that they need; that buy-in from the council comes from local firms; and that invoices are paid promptly. It is a council with a proud, successful record over the past four years, and I hope that it will be judged as such by the electorate on Thursday. It certainly deserves to be back as a Labour authority after Thursday.

T9. [277631] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): The Campaign to Protect Rural England says that while it recognises

"the need for more homes we do not believe the aspiration for 240,000 new homes a year is either achievable or desirable".

I agree. If I may return to the question that I asked earlier, how are we going to balance 240,000 new homes, 8,000 of which will be in Lichfield district, against the need to maintain the quality of life in rural areas? I do not think that that is a conundrum that can be solved.

The Minister for Housing (Margaret Beckett): I have great respect for the CPRE, but in this regard its views are profoundly misconceived. It is all very well to say that it is not going to be easy—I accept that completely—to maintain the balance with quality of life, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned. However, if we ignore the number of households who need to be housed, and assume that because the CPRE thinks so, it is not desirable to build them homes, that will certainly damage people's quality of life, especially among the many thousands of families who will be without homes.

T4. [277626] **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford) (Lab): With the construction industry still severely depressed because of the recession, what is the Department doing to try to make sure that there is work for construction workers, especially in new house building, and with particular reference to the west midlands?

Margaret Beckett: My hon. Friend will know, I hope, that we have initially purchased substantial numbers of unsold homes; in fact, we have mopped up a large amount of stock. He will also know that in the Budget proposals, provision was made to kick-start schemes that are frozen. Every scheme that is being considered will be assessed to see whether housing can be made a priority, and that will very much be part of the key judgment that is made. That is true in the west midlands and across the country.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I was interested to hear the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), to the question on planning powers and the interaction with houses in multiple occupation. An issue that I have raised several times with the ministerial team, as have my hon. Friends, is the classification of second homes and whether there is some way of looking at planning and change of use classes orders to deal with the problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Matthew Taylor) raised that possibility in the report that he provided for the Government, in line with previous reports that the Government have received from, among others, Elinor Goodman. Is there anything that they have drawn on in those reports in order to look at the issue of second homes?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Iain Wright): I am afraid that I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that there are currently no plans to require that people receive planning permission to have a second home. We would find that difficult within the planning regime. Planning legislation and the planning framework are based on land use, and if someone lives in a house, the position is similar to that for someone living in a second home, as it were. Nevertheless, councils have considerable powers regarding council tax discounts to provide resources that can be put into the community to help combat the problems experienced in large areas of the country where there are second homes.

T5. [277627] **Natascha Engel** (North-East Derbyshire) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary knows, I have about 10 park homes in my constituency. Some of them are well run and managed, but the vast majority are not. What can he do to ensure that local authorities are given far greater powers to enforce park home licences?

Mr. Iain Wright: I have spoken privately with my hon. Friend about that. I know that she plays a leading role in her area in bringing together various agencies to help enforcement. We have put in place a number of powers to help enforcement. The key factor is local authorities, the police and other agencies using those powers. Directly after oral questions today, I have a meeting with my hon. Friend the Minister for Security, Counter-Terrorism, Crime and Policing to discuss how local authorities and police can work effectively together. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) will be aware that on 12 May we published a consultation paper, "Improving the Management of Park Home Sites", which proposes the introduction of an improved park home site licensing system. In particular, that will require site owners to be fit and proper people to hold a site licence. We believe that that will drive up management standards. The consultation closes on 4 August, and I encourage my hon. Friend and others to get involved in it.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) (Con): May I take the Ministers back to the subject of eco-towns, particularly that proposed for Leicestershire in Pembury, which is causing tremendous upset to the people of Leicestershire? There is no demand for it among the people of Leicestershire. Yes, there is a demand for social housing, but what about using brownfield sites? There is a real feeling that the fact that the Co-op is leading the charge for this eco-town may be a conflict of interest between Labour and the co-operative society.

Margaret Beckett: I was about to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ingenuity in managing to raise the issue twice, having already worked it into one question to which it was wholly unrelated, although this time, of course, he can raise any topic he chooses. I say to him what I said to him a moment or two ago. We will, I trust, be able to come forward in the not-too-distant future with the results of our consultation and discussion on the set of proposals about eco-towns, and no doubt he and his constituents will have things to say then.

T7. [277629] **Ms Dari Taylor** (Stockton, South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently visited my constituency and the small town of Thornaby, which has been regenerated. Will she join me in complimenting the developers, Thornfield, and Stockton borough council for delivering an excellent scheme? Will she also acknowledge that it is not just a matter of the physical environment, as when such improvements are made, people's confidence rises and their keenness to be much more involved in the governance of their town becomes much more evident?

Hazel Blears: My hon. Friend is, as ever, a champion for her community. She will know that I have visited Thornaby probably half a dozen times over the past 10 or 12 years, and I have seen the dramatic transformation that there has been in that community, which has suffered from a range of deprivation. The shopping centre that has been developed is a marvellous, light, airy, attractive place that will bring people to businesses in that community.

The hairdressers in my hon. Friend's shopping centre did an excellent job, and I was delighted to be able to pay a visit there on my most recent visit.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When local councils are under pressure to identify land for house building under Government targets, can they now adjust the targets downwards to allow for the fact that the actual building rates have fallen dramatically owing to the credit crunch and recession?

Margaret Beckett: Of course we are looking at housing delivery, but we are also very conscious of housing need, which has been mentioned a number of times during this Question Time and which is not going away.

T8. [277630] **Lynda Waltho** (Stourbridge) (Lab): I know that my right hon. Friend is aware of the great need for regeneration in Stourbridge, and of the series of public meetings that I have recently conducted with business and local people on that topic and on the recession. At our last meeting, people were greatly excited by the announcement of a fund for temporary use of empty shops. Can she elaborate on that, and tell me how we can access that funding in Stourbridge?

Hazel Blears: I have had the pleasure of visiting Stourbridge with my hon. Friend. She, too, is a champion for her area. We hope to ensure that the £3 million town centres fund is up and running very shortly, and to get the money out so that we can provide support, particularly for local authorities to cover the temporary costs of using those empty premises for something worth while, whether for arts activities or cultural activities, as a drop-in centre for the police service, or for a rehearsal space for young people in bands—a range of activities which, just as in Thornaby, can help to draw people to the town centre. If we get people in, shopping and spending their money, that will help the businesses enormously in my hon. Friend's area. I will ensure that she gets the details as a matter of priority for her community.

T10. [277632] **Ms Karen Buck** (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): Have Ministers had the opportunity to study the recent report by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux on the dodgy practices of the more unscrupulous letting agencies? I welcome the direction of travel in the Green Paper on the private rented sector, but will the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), assure me that during the consultation he will look at whether the Government can take action to control excessive charging and poor service by some of those agencies that, frankly, rip off people who go into private sector tenancies?

Mr. Iain Wright: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. She will be aware of the private rented sector review that we commissioned from Julie Rugg and David Rhodes of the university of York, and we announced our response to the Rugg review on 13 May. One key element of our proposals is mandatory legislation on letting agents. We think that it will be an important step in improving the quality of letting agents—both for good landlords and good tenants.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): West Lancashire borough council tells me that if it were to reduce total rents by using the figure of 3.1 per cent., the formula would unfortunately have a perverse consequence when applied to the area. The council would have to reduce services by £67,000, and would risk a potential £500,000 problem on the housing revenue account. Will the Minister look at how those perverse consequences play out when applied to West Lancashire?

Margaret Beckett: Certainly I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I know that she has been anxious and extremely active on behalf of her constituency and local authority. We believe that there is actually some misunderstanding on the part of the authority about the implications of the change for it, but my officials are, I think, meeting representatives of her local authority this week, and we will work carefully through the detailed implications. I can certainly assure her and other Members that it is no part of our intention that any local authority will be disadvantaged by making the change.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), from the bottom of my heart on the changes that he has announced to the building regulation part G in order to reduce bathwater scalds in the home. I pay tribute to him on behalf of the Children's Fire and Burn Trust, the Child Accident Prevention Trust and the British Burn Association, and the plastic surgeons and the anaesthetists who deal with some of the 600 individuals who suffer severe bathwater scalds each year. They say that because of my hon. Friend's decision, a lot of people will be saved a lot of pain and suffering in the years to come.

Mr. Iain Wright: I thank my hon. Friend for those kind words, but I must say that through her leadership of the "Hot Water Burns Like Fire" campaign and her enormously positive work with my officials to provide the evidence to push forward the impact assessment that allowed us to make those changes, she has been at the very heart of the work to ensure that vulnerable people, such as young children and older people, can be safe in their baths. It is thanks to her hard work that we have been able to change the building regulations.

Point of Order

3.32 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. We are due to meet the Secretary of State for Health next week to discuss the national burn care review in the north-west, which has examined a number of centres in Manchester and Liverpool. However, we found out today that the strategic health authority review group is about to issue a press release and make its recommendations public. How can that happen when we, as Members, are due to meet the Secretary of State next week so that he can hear our views? It pre-empts parliamentary rules and our position as MPs.

Mr. Speaker: I can understand the hon. Gentleman's concern, but he might know that that is not a matter for me.

Bailiffs (Repeals and Amendment)

Motion for leave to introduce a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.33 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make requirements in respect of the use of force and forcible entry by bailiffs; to make provision for the reference to court of certain cases involving vulnerable clients; and for connected purposes.

The recession of the past 18 months has painfully demonstrated the precariousness of many people's financial situation. Debt and debt recovery action have become a reality for ever larger numbers of people, and the arrival of a bailiff is, for many of those people, the ultimate trauma and humiliation. Indeed, we know of cases in which people have had heart attacks when the bailiffs have arrived. The mental and physical stress that people undergo is one of the worst things that will ever happen to them in their life.

Of course, bailiffs and debt recovery mechanisms have to be used. There are always people who abuse trust, neglect their finances and refuse to engage with their creditors, and, ultimately, they must pay an appropriate price. Indeed, in my constituency role, some examples have been brought to my attention whereby bailiffs have intervened with their clients and been helpful in the extreme. They have been informative and sympathetic, and they have helped people with their predicament. Yet the truth is that many of those subject to such enforcement action are desperate and vulnerable people, and many are also victims of error. For them, even the actions of bailiffs who behave entirely reasonably—and they do not always do that—are disproportionate and excessive.

As I do more and more work with constituents who owe money and I learn more about the process of debt recovery and the enforcement of fines, it has become clear to me that we have got the balance wrong, and that we need to review urgently the position that we are in. We must certainly not, in any circumstances, think of escalating the powers available to bailiffs, and the Government should rethink their approach to regulation.

The bailiff at the door has been an image in literature for many years; it was a common motif in Dickens novels—but it is not a rare visitation on the feckless and the spendthrift, but an occurrence of staggering frequency. In my local authority alone, and in respect of just one debt—arrears of council tax—more than 13,000 cases ended up in the hands of bailiffs over a three-year period. The council has stated that 9 per cent. of council tax accounts—almost one in 10—end up in enforcement action. That is a staggering proportion.

What does it mean to be on the receiving end of such action? It means fear and trauma for people, particularly children. I have heard of moving cases in which children have refused to leave the house or have insisted on having the lights out at home because they are so frightened of a bailiff coming and seizing their television or computer. Being on the receiving end also means an escalation of the original debt, which simply compounds the problems that caused the financial crisis in the first place. Only last week I had to intervene in the case of a single parent with three children, one of whom is disabled.

[Ms Karen Buck]

Her parking fine, about which I was making representations, had escalated from an original £60 to £700 by the time the bailiffs arrived.

Another constituent wrote to tell me that she had two sets of bailiffs chasing the same debt. Payments had been made to and acknowledged by the council, but did not then appear on the system. She wrote:

"This has left me in a desperate state—each party refers me to the other, the fees are ever increasing and two companies are threatening the removal of goods for the same amount."

Some people are the victims of mistaken identity, while others are the victims of identity fraud. I have had cases in which action has been taken against one person because of another person's criminality. The point is that there is a lack of proportionality in the response, given the likelihood of those at the receiving end being vulnerable, or victims of mistaken identity.

The representations that I seek to make to Ministers through the Bill are threefold. The power of forcible entry into a person's home and the power for bailiffs even to use force against debtors are far too extreme to be given to civilian enforcement officers. The balance has been tilted too far against the householder's right to be secure from trespass into their home. The present position overturns a long-standing common law tradition, by which a bailiff peacefully entering a property could not be prevented from going about his or her task. The emphasis was very much on an acceptance of that right in certain cases, but obviously the tradition stopped short of forcible entry.

The powers taken by the Government in the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007 have not been brought into effect by regulation, and we await the regulations that will implement them. However, I believe that it is now clear that such powers should be repealed. Their excessive harshness should not be left on the statute book, even with an indication that the Government do not intend to implement them at present. The powers should be removed entirely.

Of course, the power to enter domestic premises forcibly to enforce the collection of criminal fines is already legal, and that too is creating appalling distress for many vulnerable households. Many of the criminal fines are levied on people on low incomes for offences such as the non-payment of TV licences, fare dodging and truancy. These are indeed offences, and it is only right that if an offence is deemed to have occurred, a penalty must be applied. However, the issue here, too, is one of proportionality, in terms of the sums involved and the manner of the enforcement deployed.

I also seek a statutory procedure requiring bailiffs to return cases involving vulnerable and impoverished debtors to the courts or the creditors, and powers to allow people subject to any bailiff action to apply to the courts for any bailiff warrant to be suspended—something that is missing from the 2007 Act. At present, that recourse is available only to people subject to county court bailiff warrants. People subject to bailiff warrants who have not been subject to county court applications have to rely on the good will and discretion of the creditor.

Some bailiffs and courts rely on case law, which holds that a distress warrant cannot be withdrawn once it has been issued. That directly contradicts the national standards for enforcement agents, which suggests a procedure enabling the bailiff to return cases of vulnerable fine defaulters to the court. The procedure to bypass this anomaly recommended by the Ministry of Justice is to write a letter to the court asking for a re-hearing of the case. In practice, however, neither bailiffs nor fine defaulters seem to know this, and disproportionate fines are being paid by benefit claimants and other low-income groups, intensifying the poverty that pushed many of them into debt in the first place. My Bill would clear up the anomaly by enabling bailiffs to return vulnerable cases to the courts and creditors for reconsideration.

Finally, we need a statutory provision for bailiffs to accept "affordable payments", with a definition of what that might mean in practice, so that before goods are seized or payment in full is demanded, an assessment is made of what can practically be afforded, at least in a single payment. By way of illustration, one of my constituents wrote to me a few weeks ago in the following terms:

"I received a letter on the 10th of January notifying me that the bailiffs were to visit my house that same day, with regards to £191 arrears of Council Tax. I explained to someone in their office that I was not aware of that debt as I did not live at that address anymore. I made an arrangement to pay the money I did owe in instalments, the last of which—£63—was due on Easter Monday. I had no money at all, and called their office to make an arrangement. They said that unless I paid £195 today the bailiffs would come and carry my goods. I requested him to take the payment of £63 which clears my account, but he said the bailiffs will still come and carry my goods because I made the payment late and incurred a charge of £131!"

This treatment of people simply will not do.

My purpose today is not to put bailiffs in the firing line: some are good, some are bad, but all are operating in a framework that is not as it should be. Likewise, I am not singling out my own council, Westminster. Although I think that it makes too liberal a use of bailiffs, and it has certainly not developed the comprehensive advice and debt service that the local population needs, I do not think that it is uniquely bad. Indeed, I would commend officers in the finance department for the quality of service that they have offered to me in helping to deal with many of the difficult cases that I put to them. Nevertheless, we do have a grave problem with debt and debt recovery services, with disproportionately harsh penalties being applied to hundreds of thousands—if not millions, over years—of some of the most vulnerable people in the country. I believe that they need greater protection, and above all, to be freed from the fear of the implementation of the excessively harsh powers held in reserve in the legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ms Karen Buck, Martin Salter, Fiona Mactaggart, Mr. Gary Streeter, Dr. Alan Whitehead, Clive Efford, Mr. Andrew Dismore, Bob Russell, Mr. Andy Slaughter, Mr. Andrew Love and Mr. David Winnick present the Bill.

Ms Karen Buck accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 102).

Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill [*Lords*]

[Relevant Document: The Ninth Report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Legislative Scrutiny: Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill, HC375.]

Second Reading

3.45 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jacqui Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill introduces measures to help complete the biggest overhaul of Britain's immigration system in a generation, strengthening our borders, controlling migration and ensuring that those who come to the UK earn the right to citizenship.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) (Con): Am I am alone in suspecting that this is an entirely content-free Bill? Will the Home Secretary explain in precisely what way the Bill will make it more difficult for people to come here whom we do not want to come here?

Jacqui Smith: Yes, that is what I am going to do.

Over the past couple of years, we have made real progress in the immigration system. We have launched the UK Border Agency as a single force at the border, and we have toughened up our visa regime, effectively exporting the border by requiring biometric registration of all who wish to travel here on a visa. So far we have enrolled more than 4 million sets of fingerprints, flagging up thousands of cases of people who have swapped their identities.

Mr. Swayne: What has that got to do with this Bill?

Jacqui Smith: We are already issuing ID cards for foreign nationals—

Mr. Swayne: This Bill?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman that you asked for an explanation and the Home Secretary is giving you an explanation. You have to be quiet while you are listening to the explanation.

Mr. Swayne: But not of this Bill, Sir.

Mr. Speaker: That is a matter for debate.

Jacqui Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The hon. Gentleman has had lunch, but he did not have coffee.

We are already issuing ID cards for foreign nationals—35,000 since last November. The points-based system is now fully operational, so that only those with the skills that we need can come to the UK to work and study.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): The Home Secretary has sought to persuade the House that somehow the Government have suddenly woken up to the problem and are doing something about it. When is she going to apologise to the British people for the overwhelming tide of migration that has hit this country? Since her Government came to power, five times as many are being admitted than were admitted under the Conservative Government. What has she to say to our constituents when she has let 500,000 migrants into this country? Her system has completely failed. When is she going to apologise?

Jacqui Smith: Today is obviously a day for the wagging of fingers, but perhaps if the hon. Gentleman looked at the figures he would realise that the most recent figures for net migration actually show a decrease. I shall go on to explain the Bill, and how the action that this Government have taken has enabled us to control migration to the benefit of this country.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Before that interruption, the Home Secretary was talking about the impact of the Government's points system. Will she have a chance this afternoon to develop the ideas that the Government clearly have in mind to encourage people to come here to work but to break the link whereby people who do so automatically become citizens?

Jacqui Smith: Yes, I can assure my right hon. Friend that I will take the opportunity to develop that argument and talk about how the infrastructure that we have now put in place enables us both to control the number of people coming for entry and, as he says, to move on to the next stage of reforms to citizenship and settlement.

In July 2007, in one of my first acts as Home Secretary, I announced plans to establish the single border force. Already among the most secure in the world, Britain's borders have been further strengthened through the success of the UK Border Agency in proving its worth. Since April 2008, better deployment and the use of new technology have led to the seizure of illegal drugs worth more than £340 million and record numbers of dangerous weapons. Last year we prevented more than 30,000 individual clandestine attempts to enter the UK illegally. We have used the e-Borders system to screen nearly 90 million passengers, leading to more than 3,000 arrests including significant counter-terrorist interventions.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Home Secretary believe that there should be some sort of limit on how many people come into the country, given the impact on public services, including housing? If so, what should it be each year?

Jacqui Smith: Yes, I believe that we should control migration to the benefit of this country. That is why the points-based system, even tier 2, has led to 12 per cent. fewer people coming in than would have been the case if the system had not been in place last year.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): My understanding is that approximately 80 per cent. of the people who move to this country are residents or citizens of one of the other 26 member states of the European Union. Are the Government prepared to reconsider the free movement of labour in the European Union?

Jacqui Smith: Free movement, and its relationship to trade and the free market, is an important element of our membership of the EU. We have taken action on new member states to ensure that, through the workers registration scheme—which the Opposition opposed—we are clear about being able to count and tackle benefit entitlement. However, we should maintain that significant ability to travel freely and work in the EU.

Colin Burgon (Elmet) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the free movement of labour is effectively another term for an incomes policy, which dramatically affects only unskilled and semi-skilled people in this country?

Jacqui Smith: No, I believe that the minimum wage in this country protects wage levels. I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to consider the economic impact of migration. We have set up the Migration Advisory Committee to advise us on migration from outside the EU, and I shall say more about that as I develop my arguments.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Jacqui Smith: No, I want to make a little more progress.

We now have more people working to secure our borders than ever—25,000 staff, including more than 9,000 warranted customs and immigration officers operating at the border, in local communities and in more than 135 countries worldwide.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): May I raise with the Home Secretary my dismay when arriving at Belfast city airport on parliamentary business on 29 March? A person there who subsequently identified himself as a member of the UK Border Agency, without credentials, used a security firm to demand identity and passports from people on a domestic flight. Officials, not the airline operator, did that. It is an abuse of power, and those officials need their knuckles rapped to ensure that they wear credentials and have a mandate from Parliament to make such demands. Is that endemic and widespread internally in the United Kingdom?

Jacqui Smith: If my hon. Friend believes that that person acted inappropriately, and he wants to write to me about it, we will ensure that the matter is investigated.

Part 1 provides the legal backing for giving front-line customs and immigration staff powers and allows for the formal transfer of around 4,500 officers currently employed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, to create a single primary checkpoint. That full integration of customs frontier work is a major step forward in our border controls and it provides the platform for even closer co-operation between the UK Border Agency and the police. That is now a day-to-day reality, with enhanced co-ordination between the police and the UK Border Agency on intelligence sharing and joint operations. An integrated single border force works alongside the police, helping us to combat illegal immigration, prevent border tax fraud, take on organised crime networks, stop the trafficking of people, drugs and weapons and counter the threat of terrorism.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): What the Home Secretary has said is helpful. However, if what she outlines is not also done with the co-operation of the entry clearance operation, the outcome will replicate the current situation, whereby there are hundreds of bogus colleges in this country and tens of thousands of bogus students who have been admitted because of the entry clearance position. The Minister for Borders and Immigration appeared before the Select Committee on Home Affairs this morning and confirmed the problem. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the Bill will help resolve the problem, and will she also—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Jacqui Smith: I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Borders and Immigration was before my right hon. Friend's Committee this morning. However, he was actually confirming that, in introducing tier 4 of the points-based system in particular, but also in tightening up the requirement for sponsorship, which, incidentally, is further strengthened in the Bill, we are taking robust action against bogus colleges and those who purport to enter this country to study.

Lembit Öpik: I am listening to the Home Secretary's argument, but would she accept that the increasingly rules-based nature of how we handle immigration creates undesirable unintended consequences? One of my constituents, Miss Cunningham, who is seriously ill, has had her request for a carer from the Philippine islands turned down on technical grounds. Does the Home Secretary recognise that the more we depend on a rules-based system, the less latitude Ministers have to interpret the guidelines in a sympathetic way? That can make the Government seem very heartless, as they have to Miss Cunningham.

Jacqui Smith: I think that it is a good thing to reduce the numerous routes that previously existed and to have a clear and fair system, as we have in the points-based system.

Let me return to the strength of the border. Through the work of the e-Borders operations centre, or EBOC, joint working between those at the border and the police is helping to ensure the security of those who travel to and from the UK. I am clear that that is where we should be putting our energy. Such work provides the advantage of robust collaboration, but without the drawbacks of significant further structural change to policing, as advocated by some Opposition Members. We will take practical steps to deliver an effective working relationship between the police and the UK Border Agency, and not just at the border, but across the country.

However, those who argue for greater border security cannot do so in all good faith while opposing the necessary wider protections that we have put in place. It is not enough to have the police and border officials working side by side. They also need the tools for the job, such as electronic border controls and ID cards for foreign nationals. Both of those protections are opposed by Opposition Members.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): In making all those changes to our border controls, will the Home Secretary consider creating a new channel of entry for people carrying British passports, so that we do not have to queue up behind hundreds and thousands of people who are coming from other countries? Surely if we are coming into our own country with a British passport, we should have our own way of coming in.

Jacqui Smith: I hope that my hon. Friend has had the opportunity to register in and to see the operation of IRIS, the iris recognition immigration system, which is now in place at many airports, and to see the facial

recognition gates operating in Manchester airport, both of which enable people with British passports to get through the necessary border controls, but much more quickly and effectively.

Andrew Mackinlay: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jacqui Smith: I will give way to my hon. Friend in a moment.

I would also like to set out the Government's intentions in respect of the Bill's provisions on the common travel area, which I know has been the subject of considerable debate in another place. There are many benefits to the common travel area, and I am clear that I want it to remain intact. However, to preserve those benefits, we need to strengthen our safeguards, particularly when faced with clear evidence that the arrangements can be subject to abuse by serious and organised criminals and by illegal immigrants. The changes that we propose will not prevent British citizens or Irish nationals from entering the UK freely, as they do now. There is no intention to introduce fixed border controls on routes between the Crown dependencies and the UK. I do not expect any noticeable impact on the journeys of most passengers. Rather, the changes are targeted at identifying third-country nationals who are not travelling to the UK legitimately. In that context I hope that we can look for support from all parts of the House.

Stephen Pound (Ealing, North) (Lab): I am greatly reassured by my right hon. Friend's comments about the common travel arrangements. Will she confirm that there will be no possibility of a repeat of the unfortunate incident that occurred a few years ago when Irish citizens who were brought up in this country and may never have set foot in Ireland found themselves victims of custodial sentences, but were then faced with deportation on the completion of their sentences?

Jacqui Smith: That issue is not about the CTA. There are strong constraints, particularly in the EU, on which people can and cannot be deported. However, the UK's relationship with the Republic of Ireland in the common travel area is an important element, and one that our proposals are aimed at safeguarding. I am of course ready to consider any other options to deliver the policy objectives that I am sure we all share to counter the vulnerability that we have identified.

Alongside our proposals for the integrated border force, and to preserve what is best about the common travel area, the Bill also proposes to strengthen our border controls in other ways. It amends existing powers so that we can take the fingerprints of foreign criminals subject to automatic deportation provisions, and it extends to Scotland a power to allow immigration officers to detain at port for up to three hours a person subject to a warrant for arrest, as is already the case in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Alongside taking the necessary steps to strengthen our border, we need to make immigration work in the interests of Britain, as several of my hon. Friends have already said. The points-based system is now fully up and running, and we have closed down the route to non-EU low-skilled migration. We have always said that the points system will allow us to be flexible in controlling migration, and more effective than the arbitrary cap proposed by the Opposition. It allows us to raise or lower the bar according to the needs of business and the country as a whole, as we showed in February when I announced changes to raise the qualification and salary levels for entering the UK as a highly skilled migrant, and when we announced proposals to give British workers a fair crack of the whip by ensuring that employers must advertise more skilled jobs through Jobcentre Plus before they can bring in a worker from outside Europe, and proposals to ensure that each future shortage occupation list published by the Migration Advisory Committee triggers skills reviews that focus on up-skilling domestic workers for those occupations.

I am grateful for the work of Professor David Metcalf and his advisory committee, and if he advises us that we need to continue to tighten these measures in Britain's economic interest, we will do so. Overall, the decisions that we have taken to control migration will reduce the numbers of economic migrants coming to Britain and staying, while ensuring that we attract and keep the right people—those with the skills that our economy needs.

Migration has brought us economic benefits, but it should not be a substitute for up-skilling the domestic work force. Nor should there be a right to automatic citizenship based purely on length of stay in Britain. Part 2 sets out the terms of the deal that we will expect newcomers to sign up to if they want to stay and build a life in this country.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Home Secretary talks about a deal between a migrant seeking citizenship and the state that awards that citizenship. Will she assure the House that there will be no circumstances in which an asylum seeker who has been on temporary admission for a long time because of delays by the Home Office in deciding their case will not have the time that they have been in the country counted as legal residence for the purposes of becoming a citizen, as is currently the case?

Jacqui Smith: There was considerable discussion on this issue in another place. I certainly think that we need to look at situations in which such delays are clearly a result of decision making not being done in time, and to look at ways in which that period of time could contribute to the period of residency for the purposes of citizenship. I do not believe that that should be a blanket provision, but I believe that there can be flexibility in the way in which we deal with that issue.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): British immigration policy must be tough, but it must also be fair. Clause 39 refers to exceptions to the application of part 2, which deals with citizenship. In my constituency, there are about 40 families from the Malayali community in southern India. Those people have perfectly respectable jobs as doctors, computer engineers and so on. They have broken not a single rule and are not a burden on the state. They have been working here and they will shortly qualify for citizenship of this country. Under the Bill, unless we keep the amendment that was made in another place, they will not qualify for citizenship because the period of grace will disappear. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that, in the interest of fairness, she will not seek to remove clause 39 from the Bill?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right that clause 39 was inserted in the other place to deal with transitional provisions, but we do not believe that the drafting of the clause would achieve what the hon. Gentleman outlined in his intervention. There are questions about the length of time that we want to take before the right provisions about earned citizenship come into place. We will, of course, look in further detail at how to deal with people already in this country and the basis on which they are here, but I do not think that we should have to wait until everyone who is here on a temporary basis has worked through the system before introducing what I think is the right deal, spelled out in our earned citizenship proposals. As part of that deal, people who want to make their home permanently here must be able to demonstrate their commitment to Britain by speaking English, working hard and playing by the rules.

Our earned citizenship proposals provide a clearer and fairer journey to citizenship. They deliver simple steps and set the right balance between demonstrating commitment to the UK and gaining access to privileges—privileges such as our benefits system, where we estimate that our proposals could result in savings of at least £350 million in the first five years. Those who show a real commitment to this country by making a positive contribution to the wider community will be able to complete the journey to citizenship more quickly. Requiring migrants to earn citizenship will, for the first time, mean that there is no automatic link, as was mentioned earlier, between coming to the UK to work or study and settling here permanently. I believe that breaking that link is an important new stage in our reform of immigration.

Mr. Frank Field: May I welcome the statement that my right hon. Friend has just made, but also ask her to develop her ideas on this very point? The Government are now committed not to growing the population through immigration, and if we are not going to do that, there needs to be a cap on the number of new citizens received in any one year. Will she clarify whether that is now also part of the Government's thinking?

Jacqui Smith: I know that my right hon. Friend has done a lot of work on this subject, and I think that he is right that now, as we put these measures into place, is the time also to give serious consideration to how we ensure that we have an appropriate level of control over the numbers of people granted the right to settle permanently in this country in the same way that we now have an appropriate level of control over those who can enter temporarily.

Keith Vaz: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jacqui Smith: No, I am in the process of completing my point. That is why the Government will bring forward proposals before the summer recess on how we can take the next steps towards a points-based system for the path to citizenship as well—in order precisely to put in place the sort of control that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has identified.

Keith Vaz: I am most grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way to me a second time. Is she telling the House that the Government now favour a cap—an absolute number that should not be exceeded—because, if so, that is quite different from what they have said in the past?

Jacqui Smith: What I have said is that while I do not think an arbitrary cap on entry, as proposed by Conservative Members, is the most effective and flexible way to control migration, I do believe that we should control the numbers coming into this country. We are doing that through the current points-based system. What I am arguing today is that we should go further and use what we know about the architecture that has been created to control the number of those granted citizenship at the next stage. That is why we will bring forward proposals on how to introduce a points-based system for the path to citizenship as well as for entry.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): To be entirely clear, is the Home Secretary saying that even if a number of people have gone through all the extra hurdles to earn citizenship—done the voluntary work and done everything else—she is going to add on top of that a cap so that those going through those hurdles might well be refused in a single year? That is what she has just told the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz).

Jacqui Smith: No, I said precisely the opposite. It is Conservative Members who believe that an arbitrary cap is the best way to control immigration. I believe that what we have seen through the points-based system—with levels of points that can be raised or lowered to suit the concerns and interests of this country—is the appropriate model to build on for a system to control the route to citizenship. It is a more flexible way of controlling those who go forward to citizenship. *[Interruption.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Jacqui Smith: The question that Conservative Members need to answer is whether they think it is now appropriate to move to the next stage of reform, and to consider the way in which we control—for the benefit of Britain—the number of people who choose to settle here and proceed to citizenship. I have said that I think that that is the appropriate next stage of reform.

The cornerstone of my approach to getting our immigration system right is that it does the right thing by the people whom it serves, and is seen to make decisions that are not only firm, but fair and fast.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jacqui Smith: No. I must make a little more progress now.

That is why the Bill includes important provisions to enable children born outside the UK to a parent who is a foreign or Commonwealth member of our armed forces to apply for British citizenship, and to ensure that children born in the UK to such parents are automatically British at birth. It is why the Bill amends the British Nationality Act 1981, allowing British mothers to pass on their British citizenship to children born before 1961. It is why the Bill creates a new children's duty: a duty for the Border and Immigration Agency to change the way in which it works with children so that it discharges its functions in a way that safeguards and promotes their welfare.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr. Gerrard *rose—*

Jacqui Smith: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard).

Mr. Gerrard: May I return the Home Secretary to what she said about a points-based system for citizenship? What she has just said in the middle of her speech seems to me to be fundamentally different from what is in the Bill. I do not know how we can debate and pass the Bill as it stands if we are told that such a measure is in the offing and will come at some point in the future. It is impossible to know what the routes to citizenship will be if we do not know how the new points-based system, which has come out of the blue, will operate.

Jacqui Smith: What I said was that the Bill gives us the framework for earned citizenship. It spells out the periods during which people need to fulfil certain requirements before they can move to the next stage of citizenship.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Jacqui Smith: Furthermore, we have successfully put in place a points-based system—using, incidentally, immigration rules, not primary legislation—in order to provide flexible control over those who come into the country. I consider the logical next stage, on which there will be full consultation, to be consideration of whether and how a points-based system for citizenship would work.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will Home Secretary give way?

Jacqui Smith: Building on a comprehensive programme of immigration reform, the Bill introduces measures to make our borders more secure, to ensure that only migrants who can be of benefit to Britain are selected, and to set the standards by which newcomers can progress towards citizenship.

Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Jacqui Smith: These are firm measures, but they are fair. They get the balance right, and they have at their heart our commitment to deliver an immigration system that works in the interests of Britain and British citizens. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.14 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): It is probably appropriate for me to begin by marking what now appears to be the Home Secretary's final appearance at the Dispatch Box by noting that she is Britain's first female Home Secretary. I congratulate her on her decision to preannounce the reshuffle—that will cause a great deal of interest around this place, and may cause a bit more consternation in Downing street; indeed, I suspect that the mobile phones are on the move there again—and on her achievement in becoming Britain's first woman Home Secretary.

Britain's migration system has been in crisis for the best part of a decade, but, eight Bills and much rhetoric later, the Government have no solutions to offer. Worse still, they are not even capable of pushing through their own ideas on how to deal with the issues that they face. How do we know that? Well, last summer they published a draft Bill containing a range of ideas, most of which are still where they started—on the drawing board. That is why the Home Secretary had so little to say about the Bill this afternoon. We heard a fair amount about immigration issues, but precious little about the Bill itself. What we have now is not the comprehensive measure that the Government presented last year, but a haphazard mix of a few ideas: some that might help a little; some that are meaningless; and, in between, a few that are just absurd. The Bill will require extensive scrutiny as it passes through the House in order to try to sort out some of its problems.

All that comes from a Government who have clearly run out of purpose. We thought they had run out of ideas until the Home Secretary brought forward some new proposals, rather to the consternation of some of her fellow Labour Members. We will, no doubt, find out a bit more about them as we proceed, and we will discover whether there is any substance to them. We need action to tackle the problems in our immigration system, but this Bill and this Government cannot deliver that action.

Rob Marris: May I ask the hon. Gentleman the same question that I asked my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary? Given that about 80 per cent. of immigration into the UK is made up of people who are residents of other EU member states, does the hon. Gentleman think the UK Government should look again at the free movement of labour provisions within the EU?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have always argued for transitional arrangements for new member states. It was this Government, not us, who took the decision not to impose those transitional arrangements, unlike almost every other European country. We would certainly put them in place for new member states. As for existing immigration from eastern Europe, however, that is a result of a decision taken by Ministers of this Government four or five years ago, so that train has long since left the station.

Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman has misunderstood my question. I am not talking about transitional arrangements. Instead, I am talking about one of the fundamental aspects of the architecture of the EU—the free movement of labour. I think there is a case for looking at that again. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Chris Grayling: No, I do not think we are going to look again at the free movement of labour within the EU. However, the hon. Gentleman should recognise—he will discover this, if he looks at the statistics—that migration into this country from outside the EU remains higher than migration from inside the EU. We have long argued for an absolute cap on the number of people coming into this country from outside the EU. That remains our policy and we wish that the current Government would adopt it, but the truth is that they will not do so.

[Chris Grayling]

Over the past 10 years, this Government have presided over the most chaotic situation in our immigration system in modern history. Even the Minister for Borders and Immigration has admitted that

"People didn't believe the authorities knew what they were doing, and there's a very good reason for that – they didn't."

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): Will my hon. Friend help me by explaining to the House why imposing a limit on the number of people coming in from outside the EU is imposing an arbitrary figure, whereas a figure fixed by the Government for the number of people in any one year who can have citizenship is not an arbitrary figure?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend's point speaks for itself. We have a Government who are all over the place in their policy and in what they say, and who have presided over a system that is chaotic, illogical and ill-managed.

Mr. Swayne: Does my hon. Friend read any significance into the fact that after having announced the new policy on citizenship, the Secretary of State pointedly refused to take no fewer than three interventions from her own side, despite delivering what was a relatively short speech for a Second Reading debate?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right, and I have a sneaking suspicion that the next Home Secretary may not be as keen to adopt the policy as the current one is on the eve of her departure from her post.

The reality is stark. Immigration into this country has increased fivefold since this Government came to power. A decade ago, net immigration into the UK was less than 50,000 a year; by 2007, that figure had risen to almost 250,000. On top of that, the Government admit that there are more than 500,000 illegal immigrants in the UK. The UK population is now projected to grow to 71 million by 2031, with half that growth directly attributed to new migration. Public services simply cannot cope with an unplanned rate of change on the scale of recent years. Police forces are struggling with the cost of translation services; schools in areas of high migration face the challenges of large numbers of pupils without English as a first language; health services will struggle to cope with the extra demands of new arrivals; and Ministers do not seem to have much of an idea on what to do about the problem.

The Home Secretary still this afternoon refuses to take the very obvious step of limiting the number of new arrivals. The sensible approach is very simple: introduce an annual limit on immigration and bring immigration down to manageable levels. When Ministers talk about introducing an Australian-style, points-based system for this country, they forget that the Australians themselves set a limit on immigration.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): As the hon. Gentleman will know, in Scotland we face structural population decline, not population increase. I have heard him talk about the Conservative cap; what would be the cap in Scotland?

Chris Grayling: We will have a cap for the United Kingdom as a whole—we have not reached the point of having a Scottish-only immigration system. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will do his best to promote Scotland as a place to live, work and invest, and rightly so.

Despite the tough talk of Ministers—I listened with amazement to what the Home Secretary said about our borders and the policing of them—they are failing to police our borders properly. We know that the number of removals from the UK is falling and that even when Ministers have extensive details about illegal immigrants, they fail to act. I keep raising at oral questions the issue of the thousands of illegal immigrants revealed 18 months ago to have been cleared to work in the security industry by the Security Industry Authority. We know that only a handful of those people have been deported, but more worrying still is the fact that Ministers are not even able to give a clear assurance that none of those people are still employed in the security industry. Indeed, the last time I raised the issue it was pretty clear that Ministers had no idea what happened to those people and where they have gone since the situation was exposed.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are many people in this country who have been here for quite a long time, who do jobs that nobody else wants to do and who lead a very poor existence. Many people, including me and some members of his party, including the Mayor of London, support the "Strangers into Citizens" campaign to treat these people decently, give them legality and ensure that they are able to live safely in our society. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that, with all his passion, he should say a word or two about them?

Chris Grayling: There are many people who are living and working in this country at the moment. I believe that people who come to this country should do so legally, through the appropriate systems. They should be able to apply to stay here and should be able to stay if the system judges that that is what should happen. I am not in favour of taking steps that would allow people who are here illegally to justify their existence here and remain. People who want to come to Britain should do so through the proper channels.

We must also consider the Government's failure to deport foreign prisoners. Only a minority of those from overseas who have been jailed in this country in recent years were actually deported after their release, and we have had hundreds of cases of deportations being aborted because of the disruptive behaviour of the person concerned and the refusal of the airline to take them. That comes after seven immigration Bills since 1997. None of them sorted the problem out, and there is little reason to believe that this one, the eighth, will make more of a difference than its predecessors.

That is particularly the case given all the things that were left behind on the journey from the draft Bill to the Bill before the House today. The original part 1 of the draft Bill, which was on regulation of entry into, and stay in, the UK has gone. Part 4 was on expulsion orders and removals. Among other things, it would have strengthened the Government's ability to fulfil their pledge on increasing deportations, and it would have broadened the definition of foreign criminals—but it is

gone. Part 5 would have strengthened the power to detain, and it would also have helped to deal with the problem of immigrant offenders on aircraft—that is gone, too. Part 6 would have reformed the management of removal centres, and part 7 would have tightened the rules on access to the UK, the use of false documentation, breaches of expulsion orders and absconding from detention.

Mr. Redwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems is that an awful lot of money and effort have gone into the wrong things? We often do not have enough staff at Heathrow and the other main ports of entry to deal courteously and quickly with all the legitimate people coming in and to take the necessary steps to weed out the ones who should not be coming in. Is that not a question of misplaced resources and bad management?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about bad management; I shall come to talk about the policing of our borders in a moment, because that is one of the big gaps in our system.

The Government have lost part 8 of the draft Bill, which would have addressed carriers' liability. Part 9 would have introduced tougher rules on employing illegal workers. All the things that I have mentioned have gone, and when the spine of a Bill is ripped out, it is hardly surprising that the Bill collapses under scrutiny. This Bill will do no harm, but little good.

So, what is left? Part 1 of the stripped-down Bill tinkers with the powers given to the UK Border Agency, which was set up by the Government to create a semblance of action, but as usual what this Government are doing misses the point. The Bill only shuffles things around and does not deal with our biggest problem—our porous borders. The fact that our borders are so poorly controlled is a big challenge. A huge proportion of illegal immigrants in Britain arrive in the back of a lorry. People trafficking is causing misery and despair to those caught up in it, yet the lax controls at our borders make us a magnet for the traffickers—no wonder the UK is classified as a high-level destination country for trafficking.

We are pleased that in part 4 the Government have answered our call to amend the law that allowed very young children to be trafficked with impunity. The measure will amend the definition of exploitation to remove the requirement for a child to be "requested or induced" to undertake any activity in order for an act to be regarded as trafficking for exploitation. But that is not enough and more will need to be done. The issue is not only people being smuggled into the country—senior police officers have warned about the scale of smuggling of illegal firearms and replica weapons into the UK, and the Government have admitted the scale of the problem.

I listened with astonishment to the Home Secretary's remarks about how secure our borders are. Only a few months ago, the Minister for Borders and Immigration—always a useful source for thoughts about why the Government's policies are not working—told a newspaper:

> "We have, compared to other rich countries, been liberal in our border controls."

A few moments ago, the Home Secretary described those borders as among the most secure in the world. No wonder we do not have joined-up thinking about immigration in Whitehall.

Then we had the Home Secretary boasting about her border force, but—extraordinarily—it has no policing responsibility. I heard a lot of nonsense from her about integrated policing. I have talked to police in our ports in areas where they have to cover points of entry into the country, and they have a constant battle to balance local policing with the need for policing in the ports. A police officer from a port may be policing the town centre on a Friday or Saturday night rather than policing the port, and that is not good enough.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says that he has been round the ports, but I am not sure that he has been to the port of Holyhead in my constituency. I go there regularly, and the system works well. The hon. Gentleman is talking about chief constables who complain about cuts in their forces, but within the ports counter-terrorist units have been set up, with close co-operation between the police and the UK Border Agency. Has he seen that working, or is he only listening to chief constables?

Chris Grayling: In this country, we have a piecemeal approach to policing our borders, with a pocket of policing here and another there. In too many places we have inadequate policing that is divided between different responsibilities. The Conservatives remain convinced that we need a dedicated border police force—*[Interruption.]* The Home Secretary is muttering about the e-Borders project. We do not object to the principle of keeping a record of who comes into and goes out of the country. However, I do not believe that we need to maintain detailed records of 10 years of holiday arrangements, holiday partners or credit card statements for every citizen who wants to go on holiday. We need to achieve a balance in what we do, and the Government have completely failed to find that balance.

Part 2 deals with citizenship. We have just heard about the chaotic Government policy on that issue. We have one set of changes in this Bill and now we discover that another set of changes will be introduced "before the summer", according to the Home Secretary. Why can we not do this properly in one go, if she has a grand plan for the issue? Judging by the comments from those on the Labour Benches, her successor will struggle to get any such measures past the Labour party.

The citizenship proposals in the Bill construct a complicated and bureaucratic set of mechanisms to deal with the adverse consequences of out-of-control immigration—consequences that we have been warning about for years. Now we know that the Government's plan is to introduce a new points-based system—the second in our immigration system. The new category of probationary citizenship will be a precursor to citizenship, to replace the existing limited leave to remain. What does the new category add of value to the existing arrangements?

As for the concept of active citizenship, the basic principle is that those who wish to become British citizens should contribute to this country, and that is well established. Someone is granted citizenship every five minutes in this country and, of course, they want to play a positive role in our society. British citizenship is a privilege, not a right, but we do not know how the active citizenship proposals will work in practice. As usual, the Government intend to set out the details in secondary

[Chris Grayling]

legislation, but Parliamentary should have the opportunity to scrutinise the important question of which activities will count towards qualifying for citizenship.

Keith Vaz: When the Home Affairs Committee considered the issue, we were concerned that there is no list of acceptable activities for people to engage in. Many new immigrants spend their time on informal relationships and attending informal activities, which would not be properly regulated. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it should be for Parliament and the public to send in suggestions about what would constitute active citizenship? More work needs to be done in this area, so that we have a clear list available for people to follow.

Chris Grayling: The Home Affairs Committee Chairman makes a very good point. I agree with him that input from Parliament and the people whom we represent would be welcome. It is a shame that as usual, sadly, we have to debate such a Bill in this House. It has been reduced in size to such a degree that it will surely allow more detail to be studied in the areas where it is debating change. Surely there will be room for discussion such as that which the right hon. Gentleman proposes.

Mr. Gummer: Before my hon. Friend leaves that point, is this not another example of serious issues that affect the human rights of people in this country being pushed aside into subsidiary legislation instead of being discussed in this Chamber by those people who are elected to deal precisely with these matters? Is that not part of the reason why we have lost so much of the respect of the people?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. We need less legislation done well rather than the glut of legislation that we have had under this Government, which, since we are on the eighth immigration Bill, palpably does not work in the way that we would like it to. We want less legislation done well, with proper scrutiny and proper detail, rather than eight immigration Bills done badly, which is what we have had under this Government.

Has the Home Secretary fully considered the impact of effectively compelling those who want to accelerate their path to citizenship to undertake voluntary work? What will be the impact on the voluntary sector? There is also the question of how the condition will be applied in a fair manner that does not put certain groups of applicants at a disadvantage.

Stephen Pound: It is perhaps salutary to note that until my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) left, there were people of nine different national origins sitting in this Chamber. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that under the previous political Administration a person could become a British citizen and not speak a word of English? That is no longer the case. Will he give credit to this Government and this Administration for at least introducing that requirement, which he surely believes in and supports?

Chris Grayling: I do indeed. I would go further and strengthen those requirements. However, one small piece of success does not detract from the fact that we have a system in chaos that has been mismanaged over a decade and desperately needs to change.

Mr. Swayne: A few moments ago, the Secretary of State was asking my hon. Friend from a sedentary position whether he would support her proposals. I hope that he will give no such commitment, as we have no idea what those proposals will be, as yet.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Since the Secretary of State has announced a new range of policies in relation to citizenship this afternoon that no one else in the House knew were coming, I think that we should wait with bated breath to see what else the Government bring forward during the course of the Bill.

Robert Key: On consideration of the timetable motion later today, will my hon. Friend make absolutely sure that there is time to debate the issues, which will be put before the House at some point in the future and which will involve something that we do not know about yet? Will he also fight hard to retain clause 39, which was put into the Bill in the other place with the support of our noble Friends? This is a matter of fairness and justice. We can toughen up our immigration policy a great deal, but we must be fair.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We need a tougher immigration system in this country and we need tougher controls, but above all the system has to be fair and welcoming to those who have the right to be here. It is important that we balance necessary toughness with common human decency, which would characterise the policies on this side of the House were we to hop to that side of the House in the near future.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I want to hear a bit more about the hon. Gentleman's capping policy. Has he any figures for the numbers by which it would reduce immigration? Secondly, would the capping be by occupation or profession?

Chris Grayling: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is very keen to discover Conservative policy, but we are dealing with a situation that is probably a year away. Before we get to that point, I would be delighted to write to him and the public as a whole with more detail about what we intend to do.

Let me move on to what I think is the most absurd portion of the Bill—the proposed change to the common travel area. For most of the past century, people travelling between the UK, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and the Republic of Ireland have been able to do so without border and immigration controls. Anyone who is tempted to be reassured by the Home Secretary's comments should go back and look at the *Hansard* record from the other place to be absolutely clear about the Government's intentions.

The common travel area was introduced in 1921, when Ireland was partitioned. It survived throughout the second world war. Only now have the Government decided that change is necessary; we disagree. The Government's proposals are unworkable and should be scrapped. We oppose them, most importantly because the plan is completely unenforceable. What on earth is the point of having tougher controls at ports and airports between, for example, Britain and the Republic of Ireland if the land border between the two does not exist in any

physical form at all? All the security installations between the two have been dismantled, and in many places the border has always been no more than a bend on a country lane.

Unless the Government are now planning to introduce border controls between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, their plans are completely unworkable. I trust that even this authoritarian Administration do not propose to introduce internal movement controls within the UK. That is why we brought forward an amendment in the other place to remove the proposals from the Bill. I very much hope that Ministers will accept that change, but I fear that they plan to continue the battle to secure a change that is not needed and not workable.

In the light of recent events, the glaring omission from the Bill concerns student visas. It is clear that the student visa system is being exploited by thousands of bogus colleges acting as fronts for illegal immigration. We have warned the Government about that for years. Getting a student visa for Britain is big business in Pakistan. High-quality fake documents that will help applicants to get visas are on sale for £100, and self-styled "immigration consultants" are hard at work trying to beat the system. The British high commission in Pakistan previously estimated that half of all students to whom it grants visas disappear after reaching the UK. Just last week, a national newspaper reported that four of the students recently arrested and later released had certificates from a bogus college in Manchester. They were then given places at English universities. The institution in question allegedly brought hundreds of people over from Pakistan before eventually being shut down by the Home Office.

Despite that threat, in April we found that student visa applications from Pakistan are being handled by the UK Border Agency not in Pakistan but in Abu Dhabi, to allow for a reduction in staff in Islamabad. Anxious to appear to be tackling the problem, the Government introduced a new, much shorter, list of approved colleges for sponsoring UK student visas. The Minister for Borders and Immigration boldly claimed that that formed part of

"the most significant changes to our immigration system since the Second World War".

There were about 15,000 institutions on the Government's approved register, but now there are only 1,500 institutions on the list. That dramatic reduction prompts the question why many of them were on the official list in the first place.

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): It is simply not the case that there were ever 15,000 institutions on any approved list. The Government's estimate was that 15,000 institutions were attempting to attract such people. There are in fact 1,600 sponsored institutions.

Chris Grayling: If there were only 1,600 sponsored institutions, the Government have reduced the total by about 100. What guarantees can they give us that the system is now as watertight as the Minister for Borders and Immigration appears to suggest that it is?

Mr. Woolas: I invite the hon. Gentleman to do his homework. If he reads the evidence that was given to the Home Affairs Committee this morning, he will find that what he has just said is simply not the case.

Chris Grayling: We will see about that.

Keith Vaz: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will read the evidence that the Minister gave to the Committee this morning. As a direct result of it, we are even more concerned about the number of students in the country at the moment who are seeking an extension. We have decided to extend our inquiry and will invite Ministers from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to give evidence, because this is not just a Home Office issue; it is an issue for DIUS, too. We will continue with the inquiry because we believe that it merits the attention.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the Select Committee Chairman for that, and I hope that Ministers will look carefully at the report that he and his colleagues will put together. It worries me that the Minister is so cavalier in his responses this afternoon, when quite clearly the Select Committee has identified a serious issue that remains to be addressed.

This is a weak Bill from a weak Government. In recent months the Minister for Borders and Immigration made a series of tough comments designed to capture headlines in the tabloid press, but the Bill shows the big gap between the rhetoric and the reality. We have moved from the publication of an extensive draft Bill last summer to the formal proposal of a timid and insubstantial Bill this spring. Nowhere do we see any of the changes that should have been brought before the House to deal with the problems of our chaotic immigration system. There are no proposals formally to establish a border police force to deal with trafficking, smuggling and illegal immigration. There is no attempt to establish an annual limit on immigration into the UK, and there are no moves significantly to strengthen the rules to ensure that all new arrivals speak English to an adequate level. Instead, there is a hotch-potch of measures, some of which may make a bit of difference, while others, such as the proposals on the common travel area, make no sense at all. After 12 years in government, and 12 years of failure to manage our immigration system, that is the best that the current set of Ministers can come up with. Small wonder that so many people now think that what we really need to change is not Ministers but the Government.

4.39 pm

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): I wish to begin by saying something about part 2 and its proposals on citizenship and naturalisation. Becoming a British citizen is an important step. If someone becomes a British citizen, they gain unrestricted access to work, the ability freely to go in and out of the country, to stay away for as long as they wish, the right to vote and so on. People regard citizenship as significant. When citizenship ceremonies were first introduced, I was a little sceptical about whether they would work and whether they would be viewed as something that mattered. However, I have gone to citizenship ceremonies, and spoken to people taking part. They regard that ceremony and the acquisition of citizenship as important.

I am concerned about the uncertainty created by the part 2 proposals. At the moment, the route to citizenship is fairly clear. The granting of temporary permission—I know there are many different forms of temporary

[Mr. Neil Gerrard]

permission—leads to indefinite leave to remain which, in turn, leads to citizenship. It is confusing that, according to the Bill, the right to indefinite leave appears to have been removed, and permanent permission is wrapped up with citizenship. Consequently, people will be subject to much longer periods of uncertainty and temporary permission before they can acquire the permanent permission to stay that comes with citizenship.

Mr. Woolas: My hon. Friend speaks from great knowledge of his constituents. May I just reassure him that the proposals do not affect individuals who already have indefinite leave to remain?

Mr. Gerrard: I absolutely appreciate that point, but a different mechanism will apply in future when the indefinite leave status will not be granted to people. Instead, they will get citizenship, and with that they will gain permanent permission to stay.

May I just say a word about something that the Home Secretary said, which I do not think any of us had heard about before—the suggestion that there might be a points-based system in relation to citizenship? Obviously, we have no idea what that would actually mean, but I can see how the points-based system that applies to people coming here to work might translate into a points-based system for citizenship. It is likely that under a citizenship points-based system people will gain points if they are in work or perhaps even depending on the money that they earn. They will gain points depending on whether they are involved in certain activities such as community service and voluntary activity, which are mentioned in the Bill. In turn, that means that some people will be fundamentally disadvantaged by the proposals on work and voluntary activity. Inevitably, it will be more difficult for people with health problems, people with disabilities, and perhaps elderly people to gain such points. Certainly, some women will find it much more difficult to take part in the voluntary activity that is suggested as a means of accelerating the acquisition of citizenship.

The Bill will discriminate against certain people because the proposals on voluntary activity, as drafted, will make it easier for some people to pass the test than others. If that proposal is then incorporated into a points system, it could well mean that some people will wait much, much longer before they can qualify for citizenship. That will certainly impact on people who do not have a lot of money. Volunteering sounds great, but it is not necessarily expense free. People acting as volunteers may not always do so without some cost to themselves. Some of the voluntary sector organisations have pointed out as a possible problem that they may not be able to recompense a volunteer's expenses.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Gentleman may also have received representations from voluntary organisations expressing their concern about their possible role in monitoring that voluntary work, and the responsibilities and perhaps the additional costs that will come with it.

Mr. Gerrard: That is a valid point. We are in danger of setting up some quite bureaucratic structures in order to try and monitor the voluntary work, if that is to be done in a meaningful way.

There has been some discussion in the debate about students coming to fake colleges. I can promise my hon. Friend the Minister for Borders and Immigration that if the systems in the Bill are put in place, fake voluntary organisations will come into existence and attempt to make money by charging people for certificates saying that they have done some voluntary work in order to help them into citizenship. I can almost guarantee that that will happen if the system is implemented. I see my hon. Friend smiling and nodding.

Mr. Woolas: My hon. Friend makes a good point. At all stages in immigration policy, one has to predict where it will go. By highlighting the point, he is helping the Government to prevent it.

Mr. Gerrard: I hope the Government will think again about the requirement. I suspect that it will be very difficult to implement it in any meaningful way that is free from abuse and does not lead to some people, through no fault of their own, being disadvantaged because they find it difficult, as a result of their circumstances, to take part in any meaningful voluntary activity. Somebody who is working long hours, who is doing shift work, or who is a single parent—with the best will in the world, such a person may find it extremely difficult to undertake voluntary activity.

Lynne Jones: Does my hon. Friend share my concerns that the Home Secretary did not address the recommendations made in pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Home Affairs Committee on such issues as retrospective changes being brought in, and that she would not give way when I attempted to raise the issue, and also that the Bill does not deal with earlier recommendations from the Joint Committee in relation to what appears to be a deliberate policy of destitution for many people who, through no fault of their own, cannot return home?

Mr. Gerrard: I very much agree, and I shall come on to the point about destitution.

On the issue of transitional arrangements, which was raised earlier, there is some protection now through clause 39, which was introduced in the Lords, for people who have applied for citizenship or indefinite leave and for people in the final qualifying year. I am not convinced that that goes far enough. We ought to learn from the fiasco resulting from the changes to the highly skilled migrants programme, when the rule was changed from a four-year qualifying period to a five-year qualifying period to get indefinite leave. That led to a High Court case, which was lost, leading to the policy having to be thought through again. I suspect we may end up along the same route if we are not careful and if we do not make sure that there are transitional arrangements in the Bill.

I accept that it is impossible for transitional arrangements to exempt from the provisions anybody who is already in the country for whatever reason, but people who are already well through the process and getting towards the point where they can acquire citizenship ought to be protected in the transitional arrangements.

On qualification for citizenship, there is another issue: employment for people who have entered the country as migrant workers. The Lords discussed the requirement

for continuous employment, and I have concerns about how that might be interpreted, especially if, as may be, the courts get involved in the interpretation of continuous employment. In the Lords debates, Ministers said that there would be circumstances in which an employer could change. For instance, if an employer went bankrupt, it would clearly not be reasonable to say that a person had been out of continuous employment if they then went into another job.

People may well find themselves locked into staying with the same employer, however, and they may find it difficult to change jobs during the qualifying period. Concerns have been expressed—certainly by a number of trade unions—about what that might mean: the potential for exploitation, and the potential for people to be locked into working conditions that are even unlawful. Indeed, we know that that happens now. Someone who has a dubious immigration status or is scared about what might happen to them if they lose their job can end up working in unlawful conditions, not being paid the minimum wage and so on. They are scared to complain, however, because they are scared of the consequences. They are scared that they will lose their job, apart from anything else. If another consequence is going to be that they lose their qualifying period for citizenship and have to go back to the beginning of the process, that will act as a further incentive not to complain. We must therefore look at introducing some safeguards on the qualifying periods.

A similar point arises about safeguards on periods of absence from the country. Ministers gave some assurances in the Lords, but it is currently possible to average periods of absence over the five years, and I should like the Bill to retain that averaging system.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend will be aware that in the Lords there was discussion about an amendment to enable Chagos islanders who were born before 1969, but to parents from those islands, to be granted British citizenship in line with all the others who were granted citizenship through the British Overseas Territories Act 2002. Unfortunately, the Government resisted such amendments. Does my hon. Friend think that the Bill would be improved if such an amendment were made at some stage in this House?

Mr. Gerrard: This would be an appropriate place to try to look for a solution to the Chagos islands problem, which has been going on for some considerable time.

One other matter that I hope the Minister will address in his winding-up speech is access to benefits and services. It is generally accepted that full access to benefits and services should be withheld until someone has either citizenship or permanent residence. Indeed, that is essentially the current situation: certain benefits and services cannot be accessed until someone has permanent residence, at least. However, given that the Bill extends the qualifying period for citizenship, I am concerned that people will end up paying taxes for much longer periods without being able to reap the benefits from those taxes or to access even contribution-based benefits. I should be extremely concerned if, in the regulations that follow the Bill, any attempt were made to restrict access to health care for a longer period than operates at present.

Unless I missed it, when introducing the Bill, the Home Secretary did not mention the provision to restrict judicial review applications. That caused some argument and controversy in the Lords, and I hope that it will be covered in the winding-up speeches. Clause 55 includes an amendment that was made in the Lords, limiting the cases that can be transferred from the High Court to the upper tribunal. I strongly believe that it ought still to be possible to go to the High Court.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend has been here long enough to remember previous immigration Bills in which the Government said that they wanted to streamline the appeals process so that there was a need for only one tribunal; if anyone needed judicial review, they could go to the High Court. What my hon. Friend has mentioned goes against the philosophy that the Government have developed in the past 12 years. The Government are returning the cases to a new, upper tribunal, having said that we did not need a second tribunal.

Mr. Gerrard: That is absolutely right. I always thought it perfectly sensible for there to be a single appeal. There were systems, for example, under which someone would have an appeal against an asylum decision and, separately, another appeal when there was an attempt to remove them. It makes sense to put the two together so that the appeal looks both at the asylum decision and at human rights applications, for instance.

The issues can be complicated and are fundamental to human rights; they are about whether someone will be allowed to remain in this country or will be removed. In such important cases, it ought to be possible to go to a High Court judge. I am hoping for reassurance that in the later stages of consideration no attempt will be made to remove the Lords amendment in respect of clause 55.

I should like to conclude by discussing destitution, an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Lynne Jones). As has been pointed out, the scope of the Bill has been very restricted in comparison with that of the draft Bill that we considered last year. The draft Bill would have consolidated and covered a whole range of issues, and allowed us to debate them, which are missing from this Bill. We should be considering the clearly missing issues of the support of asylum seekers and the number of people who are in this country for one reason or another and are living in destitution.

Let us consider those who have been refused leave to remain but are still in the country; very significant numbers of them are from countries that the Government recognise are not safe to return people to: Zimbabwe, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia and so on. Yet we require those people to sign up to section 4 to get support. That means that they have to sign a piece of paper saying that they are prepared to go back, although they are terrified of doing so. If they do not sign, they get nothing; we do not even allow those who have signed up to section 4 to work to support themselves, even when we know that they may be in the country for a significant period.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way a second time. Does he share my concern that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is not included in

[Jeremy Corbyn]

the list of countries too dangerous to return people to? Sometimes the information relating to what is or is not a safe country seems incredibly subjective.

Mr. Gerrard: There are a lot of examples of dubious decisions about where it is safe or not safe to return people to. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have seen the reports about the treatment of some people who have been returned to the Congo; they have ended up in the hands of jailers.

Lynne Jones: A young woman from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who was living in my constituency, is awaiting deportation to the DRC tomorrow. She has no relatives there, but is being sent back. She fears that she will be subject to arrest, rape and other mistreatments that, as has been well documented, have happened to other people who have been deported to that country.

Mr. Gerrard: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There is evidence that that has happened in returns to other countries.

Irrespective of the returns policy, I come back to the issue of the destitution of those people who are here. If we accept that someone cannot be returned, which is essentially what we do when we let someone be supported under section 4, we should be looking at giving that person the opportunity to support themselves by working until it is possible to return them to their country of origin. It is a pity that those aspects of asylum support are not covered in the Bill, which means we do not have the opportunity properly to consider what those support systems should be.

I hope that in winding up the debate the Minister will answer some of my questions, particularly on judicial review. I also hope that we can hear more about exactly what is being considered in terms of the points-based system towards citizenship. That represents a fundamental change, and we should know something about it before the Bill has completed its passage through this place, given that it has already been through the Lords and there will be no opportunity to amend it further other than in the Commons.

5.1 pm

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): I am grateful to be able to follow the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard), whose expertise in this area is well known. I strongly agree with his points on judicial review and on destitution, which are well taken.

The Home Secretary and I have had a pleasant and genial relationship, but I have always been surprised at how little we have been able to agree on. Nevertheless, I certainly pay tribute to her, not least for being the first woman Home Secretary, which is an important milestone for this House and for Government.

I am afraid that this Bill is another example of the Government forcing through ill-thought-out, poorly drafted legislation. It is the 11th immigration Bill since 1997—we have had almost one a year—yet it still does not deliver on the Government's promise of a Bill that would simplify and consolidate the entire immigration and asylum system; for that we must wait at least until the end of this year. Instead, we have an interim Bill with more piecemeal reforms—some good, some bad, and some, frankly, unclear. Like the hon. Member for Walthamstow, I must confess to being confused about exactly what the Government are proposing as regards the points-based system and citizenship.

Much of the detail will remain a mystery until the slew of statutory instruments for which the Bill provides is forthcoming. Admittedly, I have not had such a long career here, but I cannot remember ever having seen a Bill before the House with so many clauses involving phrases such as

"The Treasury may by order make provision for",

"The Attorney General may by order assign to",

and

"The Secretary of State may make regulations".

There is an astonishing degree of reliance of statutory instruments. When in doubt, the Government want to give Ministers the power to make things up at a later date. This is yet another "Trust me, I'm a Minister" Bill. Well, this House should not trust Ministers with clean-sheet powers. We do not even know who those Ministers will be this time next week, let alone in a year's time.

Such matters of border control and nationality are far too important to be left to statutory instrument and should be debated as primary legislation on the Floor of this House. We are, after all, debating nothing less than what defines us as a nation, for any country that cannot control its borders cannot choose who lives among us, and soon cedes its own identity. The defence of the realm and the establishment of border control is one of the most basic functions of Government. Admittedly, it has never been easy for a nation with the third longest coastline in Europe, at 7,758 miles—as generations of west country smugglers who evaded the excise men knew. Nor should we underestimate the challenges posed by the new age of mass travel and globalisation. The number of people entering and leaving this country every year is more than three times the number in our population. In 2006 we recorded 192 million passenger movements in aviation alone, not counting the channel tunnel or shipping, and 279 million tonnes of freight was imported—an increase of 50 per cent. in just a decade. Every flight full of tourists and honest business people may also carry illegal migrants, and every lorry is a potential vehicle for people smuggling.

That context is crucial, because this country above all others has thrived, from the earliest times when Cornish tin was sold to Byzantium, on taking our opportunities across the world to buy cheap and sell dear. Our migration system must sift the illegal from the vast mass of honest trade and travel, and that is not easy.

Migration has increased enormously, too, in the age of mass travel, and immigrants make a hugely valuable contribution to our society. I am sorry that no Member has so far stressed that. There are 11,000 overseas teachers working in British schools, and in London some 23 per cent. of doctors and 47 per cent. of nurses were born outside the UK. In many parts of the country, our public services would collapse without the dedication and commitment of many people who came to this country to make a better life for themselves, but also for us.

Yet the evidence is that we are not getting the balance right and are failing to persuade our fellow citizens that the system is under control. Alarmingly, a poll conducted in May 2007 found that 61 per cent. of people believed

that there were too many immigrants living in Britain, and almost 40 per cent. said that immigration and race relations were among the top three issues facing the country. Until 1999, that figure was consistently below 10 per cent. Net migration into the UK has risen from 47,000 in 1997 to 198,000 in 2007—a substantial annual figure and a substantial increase.

Sadly, the Government cannot say that they expected, predicted or planned that increase. When we, along with Denmark and Ireland, agreed to be the only EU countries to open our borders to workers from central and eastern Europe, the forecast was that there would be barely 52,000 migrants in four years. Instead, there were 766,000. That is possibly, in a fairly wide and crowded field, the worst Government forecast in history. There have been strains in the areas to which migrants have disproportionately come. It has affected pay rates in local labour markets and put stress on local public services for which funding allocations were based on census data rather than on more up-to-date information such as NHS enrolments.

Before anyone jumps to the conclusion that we need to withdraw from the EU because we cannot afford such free movement—I am sorry to see that the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) is not now in his place—let us remember that that was a one-off influx that arose because we decided not to apply transitional arrangements of the kind applied by Germany, Italy, France and others. Those who wanted to migrate had only three EU countries to go to. It was our decision, not the EU's.

The same mistake is not being made when it comes to Romania and Bulgaria, and it remains the case that our fellow citizens have availed themselves of the EU's freedom of movement provisions more than those from other countries. Some Members may remember the TV programme "Auf Wiedersehen, Pet". More British citizens live in the rest of the EU than other EU citizens live here, so populist calls for EU withdrawal would be counter-productive in their own terms. Withdrawal would deprive our citizens of choice and probably lead to an increase in the UK population, and certainly to an increase in strains on the NHS.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but is not part of the problem, and part of the reason for the British public's anger, the fact that they were told by the Home Office that the number who would settle here when people from the 10 new EU countries were allowed access to live and work would be something like 13,000 or 16,000? In reality it was closer to 1 million. That is why the British public felt angry at being let down.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman was clearly asleep earlier in my speech, because I gave the precise figures. Some 52,000 migrants in four years were predicted, and in fact there were 766,000. He is absolutely right, and I had already made that point.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): He was not right about the numbers.

Chris Huhne: Indeed, I corrected the hon. Gentleman's numbers; I thank my hon. Friend.

If we are to maximise the benefits that migration can provide to the UK, while minimising the potential downside, we need better control of our borders. Yet the Bill does too little, too late. It was madness for the previous Conservative Government to begin to dismantle exit controls, given that we no longer have a way to check whether short-term visas are respected, and whether people issued with them return home. It was madness because we know that most illegal immigrants, contrary to what the official Opposition claim, are overstayers on legitimate visas. They did not arrive in the back of lorries.

It was equal madness for the Labour Government to persist with the abolition of exit checks and to take such a long time to reinstate them through the e-Borders scheme. It will not be fully operational before March 2014, and this year only just over half those leaving the country will be checked. How can we stop overstaying students or temporary workers if we do not know whether they have left? The Home Office must move much further, much faster to re-establish exit checks.

Mr. Woolas: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is making a superb speech and analysis. I plead with him to consider the trajectory of the roll-out of e-Borders. He is right to say that 100 per cent. will be achieved by 2014, but we will reach 90 per cent. much sooner. The remaining small ports do not allow us to achieve 100 per cent. so quickly. I hope that he will support the programme.

Chris Huhne: I am grateful for the Minister's intervention, but as far as I remember, only 60 per cent. will be achieved by the end of this year. We could be doing much more, much faster by reintroducing manual checks, if necessary, not merely the e-Borders scheme. As the Minister knows and as the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) rightly pointed out, much of the extra baggage in the e-Borders scheme is unnecessary to its key functions, which the Liberal Democrats support.

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's acknowledgement: the figures are 60 per cent. this year and will be 90-odd per cent. next year. The scheme will roll out very quickly. Does he accept the Government's serious point that the arrangements with many countries are reciprocal? If we count people coming in and going out we must reciprocate, which means that there have to be some checks on us.

Chris Huhne: How other countries apply their visa arrangements is up to them. I am merely making a common-sense point, which seems to have eluded Conservative and Labour Members for more than 10 years: if short-term visas are issued to students or those who have temporary rights to work, we need to know when they leave. If we do not know when they leave, we do not know whether the visas have been respected. That is crucial. *[Interruption.]* I am happy to give way to the Minister if he wants to raise himself from a sedentary position—but I see that exhaustion has reached such a point that he must clutch at the Dispatch Box.

Mr. Woolas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and trying to inject some life into the debate, which is important. Given his comments, will he drop his opposition to e-Borders, and his bogus claim that it is some Big Brother database and interference with people's liberties, when it is simply a border control?

Chris Huhne: I am astonished that the Minister has the effrontery to come to the House peddling that extraordinary line. Although the e-Borders scheme is necessary to check people who have short-term and student visas, building a massive database of the travel movements of every member of our population is unnecessary. The Government are going overboard, and will lose the argument about something that is essential by attempting to gild the lily and go far beyond what is necessary. They will throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Mr. Woolas: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Huhne: I have given way so many times, but I cannot resist doing so again.

Mr. Woolas: I am very grateful that the Liberal Democrat party acknowledges the desirability of electronic borders control, which it previously described as a Big Brother database. Will the hon. Gentleman now show his true European credentials and admit that if we want to count people coming into our country, we must co-operate with foreign countries in allowing them access to our data?

Chris Huhne: The Minister is simply failing to get the point. We do not need to build a massive database of the travel movements of every citizen in this country in order to make effective exit checks on those with short-term visas and ensure that we do not have illegal overstayers. If the Minister cannot understand that simple point, all I can say is that it is time for him to make way for somebody who can.

We also need tougher enforcement among employers, yet the Bill is silent on the subject. Such enforcement is the only effective way to curb illegal immigration once people have gained entry to this country, yet in 12 years of this Government, just 114 employers have been prosecuted for having illegal immigrants on their staff. We need greater efforts at integration—through language teaching, for example—yet there is nothing in the Bill that will help. Indeed, the numbers learning English are down by 39 per cent. We need better planning for public services, yet Ministers can give no assurances on the basis of what is in the Bill.

The chaotic nature of this Labour Government's immigration policy is the principal reason why there has been such a massive rise in animosity towards immigrants. The increasingly punitive rhetoric adopted by Ministers, not least the Minister who will wind up the debate, has led many of the general public to believe that immigration is bad for this country. Frankly, that is a tragedy. Illegal immigration is certainly bad, and we need to be tougher; but legal immigration has brought great benefits, and we should say so loud and clear. Yet the Bill is another example of such knee-jerk policy making.

Let me turn to the detail of the Bill. Bits of it are, frankly, worrying. The route to naturalisation is being made yet longer and more complicated, with more conditions being placed upon people wishing to go down that route. Much of the Bill is widely recognised as confusing. The new functions of UK Border Agency officers in customs matters, for example, are still a puzzle. Much of the rest is left undefined, with only the promise of statutory instruments, frustrating our curiosity. That is sloppy legislation. Many who have commented on the Bill, such as Liberty and the Immigration Law Practitioners Association, have made exactly the same observations. Statutory instruments are a useful tool, but the process cannot and should not be regarded as a substitute for the proper legislative scrutiny that primary legislation receives. There is no detail to be scrutinised because everything is left to statutory instruments, so real scrutiny in this Chamber is simply impossible.

To deal with those and other problems, the House of Lords has made some important amendments. Unfortunately, however, Ministers have already promised to get rid of them in this House, with its inbuilt majority, although I hope that that will not ensure support for absolutely any amendments that the Government see fit to introduce. Indeed, I look forward to making common cause with those on the Labour Back Benches who have expressed doubts.

Jeremy Corbyn: While the hon. Gentleman is talking about amendments, may I remind him of my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard)—which he will have heard—about the anomaly of the Chagos islanders and the unfortunate failure of the House of Lords to insert an appropriate amendment to grant justice to those who were thrown off the islands, but who, because of the bad drafting of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, are denied the right of access to British citizenship to which all others are rightly entitled?

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. He will certainly have our support if he intends to table an amendment on the issue, which is an anomaly that we need to deal with.

A national border force is necessary, but why the delay? Such a force should unite the present border control functions of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the police and the UK Border Agency, yet the proposals as drafted in part 1 of the Bill are still a muddle. They broadly extend the current powers of UKBA staff and others, as determined by the Secretary of State, but they provide no specific details. What exactly are the "general customs matters" that the UKBA will have the authority to address? The extension of powers that are exercisable by immigration officials are worrying, especially when they are so ill defined. We are concerned that the new powers blur the distinction between immigration controls and criminality. We share the concerns of Liberty, for example, that part 1 sends the signal that immigrants are, by definition, criminally suspicious. In addition, we will be pressing for clarification and reassurance from the Government on exactly how long UKBA officials would be able to detain a person at their offices, as these powers caused much confusion on all sides in the Lords.

The Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives tabled amendments on these subjects—albeit with different details—during consideration of the Bill in the other place. We will seek to address the issues again in Committee, particularly with regard to giving the Independent Police Complaints Commission a remit to investigate the UKBA, given the extent of the new powers, and to the implementation of our own integrated border force, as previously discussed.

Part 2 amends the rules on naturalisation. Again, we have some concerns. The new rules will make naturalisation more difficult to achieve, but many of the details are

absent. We do not yet know what types of visa will mean that a stay would qualify as time spent towards achieving naturalisation. Similarly, the eight or five years residency requirements to be eligible for naturalisation can be amended by secondary legislation under clause 42(2), providing no certainty at all for those embarking on the process. I very much take the point made by Conservative Back Benchers about the transitional arrangements, for those who had expected their naturalisation to be able to continue, under clause 39. We will definitely support the retention of that measure in the Bill.

The extension of the qualifying period for naturalisation is likely to have a detrimental effect on community relations, and will place applicants in difficult circumstances if they are denied access to mainstream benefits and services for longer periods. This is particularly true of asylum seekers, who are largely neglected by the Bill. We will continue to push for further changes to the Bill, to ensure that time spent in Britain by refugees prior to the determination of their claims will count as part of the qualifying period.

The introduction of a formal volunteering process is a cause for concern. Is it right that migrants should be expected to do more than those born with British citizenship? Again, the Bill does not specify what types of activity will qualify as counting towards citizenship. Neither does it address the inherently discriminatory aspects of the proposals. People in cities will find it much easier to volunteer than those living in remote communities, for example. The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) has also made the point about people who are involved in shift work or have problems for reasons of health or of family circumstances.

The process will be an administrative nightmare, too. How will the Government track what has been done and what has not? How will they ensure that people are not bypassing the system, as we have seen happen with tier 4 of the points-based immigration system, and that there is not an explosion in the number of so-called bogus colleges? The Government's track record on managing this type of project does not inspire confidence. We do not want or need a whole new bureaucratic system to deal with voluntary activities when, by their very nature, they should be voluntary.

Tom Brake: Does my hon. Friend agree that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) has already identified a potential problem with bogus voluntary organisations? An organisation to accredit voluntary organisations will no doubt be needed, thereby introducing another layer of bureaucracy into the system.

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. He is absolutely correct.

Part 3 is much amended from its original form, and much improved. The effective abolition of the common travel area with Ireland was unnecessary and without rationale, and it may have breached human rights. We very much support the new proposals, which maintain the system of open borders on air and sea routes between the UK and the Republic of Ireland that has been in position since partition in 1921.

Similarly, my noble Friend Lord Smith of Clifton inserted a very sensible protection against what the Immigration Law Practitioners Association has described as "mission creep", which prevents any provision relating to immigration control for persons entering, or seeking to enter, the UK by land from being made by Order in Council. We will fight for these changes to be maintained through the Bill's journey in this House.

There are of course some welcome features in a Bill this long. Clause 56 in part 4, which widens the definition of exploitation in the offence of human trafficking, is a positive move for the protection of children. Further measures to introduce a duty to ensure the protection of children in relation to immigration, asylum or nationality are again welcome, although widening those measures to cover children when outside the UK may also be desirable.

In total, this is a disappointing Bill. It is disappointing because it fails to rise to the challenges of an absolutely crucial field of policy. It defers difficult decisions to later statutory instruments and it panders to populism by making naturalisation more cumbersome and difficult. The Bill also represents a series of missed opportunities in failing to accelerate the reintroduction of exit checks, to address illegal immigrants or to reform the asylum system. We will not vote against the Bill tonight because we welcome the provisions to allow a more effective attack on child trafficking, but we sincerely urge Ministers to look again at the many holes that it still contains.

5.26 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne), the shadow Liberal Democrat spokesman.

We do live in very interesting times and although we have had no announcement from the Home Office, I am taking my lead from the shadow Home Secretary in assuming that the Home Secretary is going to stand down. When he paid tribute to her, she did not jump to the Dispatch Box and tell him that he was wrong. Although the Home Secretary is no longer in her place I, too, want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to her, as this is going to be her last outing at the Dispatch Box in her current role.

My right hon. Friend has been and is the first woman Home Secretary and she has done an excellent job. It is a very tough job, as her successors will find out. Perhaps for no other job than Prime Minister is the patience of a secular saint so required on account of the huge amount of work that has to be done. Every single hour of the day, something is happening in respect of this portfolio, which covers policing, immigration, justice, home affairs, the European dimension and counter-terrorism.

My right hon. Friend has always been extremely helpful to the Home Affairs Committee. I see in his place the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), another member of the Committee, and other members have been coming in and out of the Chamber. Whenever called to give evidence, the Home Secretary has been there, and she has always been transparent, open and honest. We have disagreed on many aspects of policy, particularly on the issue of police pay when matters became pretty robust, but on all other issues, my right hon. Friend has proved open and able to engage in all sorts of discussions with us. We are very grateful for what she has done.

[Keith Vaz]

The Home Secretary goes at the top of her game. Her moving on came as a surprise to me, but I know that she will make a contribution to other aspects of public life and, indeed, to the life of Parliament as she continues to be an MP. I hope that the Minister for Borders and Immigration will pass on the good wishes from me and from the rest of the House—and I mean from all political parties.

I also want to address a few words to the Minister for Borders and Immigration. When I tried to praise him this morning, he felt that it was a precursor to my then having a go at him, but on the issue that we have engaged with most recently—the Gurkhas—I must say that the Select Committee, and, indeed, the whole House is grateful for his handling of that particular aspect of immigration policy. We know that this is a difficult policy area and we understood where the Government were coming from.

The House made its views known and the Minister stood at the Dispatch Box before the House rose that evening to ask the Select Committee and Parliament to engage in a discussion about how to resolve the issue. It seemed to me unusual that a Minister was prepared to start that engagement process at such short notice, and he was absolutely true to his word. His officials and those of the Ministry of Defence met the Committee and Ms Lumley and the process started. Within a very short time, a Select Committee report was issued. I know that the Minister is not going to repeat this every time we write a Select Committee report, but on this occasion, he accepted our findings in full within 48 hours.

I would like to emphasise to the Minister that that sort of can-do attitude is precisely what we would like to see adopted for immigration policy. I believe that he still has it in him—I am making a prediction here and I stress that the Prime Minister will not be consulting me about the reshuffle—and I very much hope that he will still be in the same job this time next week. Saying that may well have damned his career and the Prime Minister, who I am sure is watching these proceedings, may well want to move him on. The Minister has made a very good start. He has been open, honest and transparent, as he was with the Select Committee this morning. He has admitted the existence of real problems in, previously, the immigration and nationality directorate and, now, the Border and Immigration Agency. He has set out his stall and made clear the ways in which he believes these matters can be resolved.

The Minister and I will still disagree about the backlog. I still believe that when he finishes his job, whenever that will be—I hope that it will be many months and years from now—he will be judged by me, and by colleagues such as my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) and for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), who have been in the House for longer than I have, on the basis of the length of the backlog. At the moment, I can give him only five out of 10 in that respect.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does my right hon. Friend share my experience of being inundated with visitors to the advice bureau who have been told that they must wait another two years before their backlog cases can be dealt with? Many people who come to see us are absolutely desperate to know what will happen to their lives. Some have been waiting five years, 10 years or even longer. That is not a decent way in which to treat anyone.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is entirely right. If Lin Homer did not exist to sign the letters, we would have to invent her. A letter from the chief executive will arrive after the busy surgery on a Friday, saying that it will take two years to resolve these matters. When the Minister came to the Dispatch Box and agreed to resolve the issue of the Gurkhas within a very short time, there was the political will and the can-do attitude. All cases would be dealt with by the end of May, and all pre-1997 cases would be dealt with within two years.

All Members, in all parts of the House, have received the famous Lin Homer letter that says "Don't write to us, because we are resolving it." "When are you resolving it?" "In two years' time." That is the fundamental problem of the way in which the immigration system has developed over the past 20 years—certainly from the moment when I entered the House. Yes, it has improved because the backlog has been reduced, but there is still a backlog which could have been cleared, at least in the last 12 years, if the Government had wanted to clear it. I know that a lot of resources have been devoted to dealing with the backlog, but I fear that the Bill will create a bigger backlog. I fear that people will to be made to jump through even more hoops in order to gain citizenship and stay in the country, and that the path to citizenship will be littered with more obstacles and hurdles.

I understand perfectly well why the Government, and Parliament, have decided to take this action. That is why I shall vote for the Bill, as I have voted for every other immigration Bill that the Government have presented in the last eight years. Although it will mean that genuine people must wait longer, we will support the Government's action. However, there is a deal. We will take the harsh medicine, but in return for what we are doing—supporting a Bill that I would never support if this were a Conservative Government and I were a Labour Back Bencher: we would be jumping up every five minutes objecting to what the Conservatives were doing—the Minister must deliver the proper, effective and efficient immigration system which has still not been delivered by the Government after 12 years.

Mr. Heath: I suppose that I should admire the right hon. Gentleman's loyalty in supporting all those Bills, but does he not agree that it would be far better if the Home Office could desist for just one year from producing nationality and immigration Bills, and instead get on with managing the Department as effectively as possible in order to make it run properly?

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. If only we could be guaranteed that—but there is clearly a whole section of the Home Office that needs legislation so that Ministers are kept busy.

When the Minister has been confirmed in his position—I fully support that, and will be happy to write a recommendation letter to the Prime Minister—he should relocate himself to Croydon. He should go there on Monday—I hope that Monday will not be too late—with all the clever, bright people whom he has brought to meetings on the Gurkhas and to meet the Select Committee, and he should sit there until the backlog is cleared. With ministerial will, he can do it.

Chris Huhne: The right hon. Gentleman's proposal is extremely interesting. Will he suggest to his Committee that it should meet for several sessions in Croydon, in order to deal with precisely this issue?

Keith Vaz: We frequently go to Croydon, but we do not necessarily get to see what we ought to see; I have found that people are very nice to Select Committees, but we still get the information that we need from the statistics, and the statistics are poor.

I know that the Minister often says that mistakes have been made, as he did in respect of bogus colleges—if he is frowning at me, he need not, because that is the best he can do. Hundreds of bogus colleges were brought into existence under this tough Government doing tough things on immigration. As one of our witnesses said this morning, people can set up a college above a fish and chip shop anywhere—even in Oldham—and they will be able to get someone into this country. That is what the universities told us today. Over the past 12 years, hundreds of bogus colleges have been set up and tens of thousands of bogus students have entered this country.

The Minister appeared before the Committee today and said, with his usual robustness and honesty, that he knows about what has happened in the past but that we now have the points-based system, which is the great panacea, and that if we open the bottle called "the points-based system"—the most fantastic thing the world has ever seen, and certainly the most fundamental review of immigration policy since the second world war—everything will be fine and calm. We then presented him with a letter from Baroness Warwick, who represents Universities UK, which points out that the very organisations that conduct the accreditation have websites that do not list either their inspectors or the institutions they have visited.

We accept that the Minister comes with good will to the House, as he came with good will to the Select Committee, and we give him the benefit of the doubt as we know he wants to sort out this problem, but we say to him that time is running out. It is not legal immigration that we are concerned about, and I do not think the people of this country are concerned about that either; they would agree with what the hon. Member for Salisbury (Robert Key) said earlier about clause 39 and those people who have come to this country legitimately with their skills—doctors and others were mentioned—to benefit our country. Of course, they have been benefited as individuals, but they have also benefited our country, and they might now be told that they cannot get citizenship or they will have to wait—I know this does not apply to those people who currently have indefinite leave—from five to eight years, and from three to five years, and in between this wait, they will have to satisfy various criteria. We even accept that, but what we cannot accept is what the Home Secretary said today about a cap being placed on citizenship. It is no good the Minister looking at me as he is now; that is precisely what she said at the Dispatch Box today, having said all along that we do not accept the notion of a cap. She was talking in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), and she said that there would be a cap on citizenship. That is something that the Minister himself originally said when he first took up his post; he talked about a certain level of population in this country, and then said that was not the case and that he had never mentioned a cap.

If we are to have a new, points-based system for citizenship, the House needs to know about it. We do not need to be told, as if we are children, that this is a framework document and that some time in the future—in the summer—another consultation document will be published. The Minister must be fair to the House. In his wind-up, he needs to answer what has been put by the shadow Home Secretary, the Liberal Democrat Home Affairs spokesman and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow. If there is something in a drawer in Lunar house on a new consultation on a points-based system for citizenship, we have a right to know what that is; we have a right to know what it is before we vote through this Bill on Second Reading, and certainly before Report and when it comes back in the final Session.

I ask the Minister to be open and honest with the House. We know there are problems. We know that the public will not accept unlimited immigration—the kind of immigration that brought me and the people who arrived on the Windrush into this country. Those days are, of course, completely gone. I am also thinking of those of my constituents whom Idi Amin expelled from Uganda and who came here from east Africa; people will never be accepted in those numbers now. Those who have come since then have all been EU citizens who have an absolute right to come here, and some of them have, in fact, returned. People do not mention the fact that they have preferred to go back to their eastern European countries because, for the moment, their economies are doing slightly better than ours—although I am sure they will all come back again when our economy is fully repaired.

That fact is that there is no mass immigration in Britain any more—the Minister knows that—but there is the illegal immigration that is so blighting our country, and we want him and this Government to do much more about that. I know that he does not like guessing the number of illegals, but he has clever officials, so he should sit them down and ensure that we get the figures. The Mayor of London has the figures and at least he has a solution to dealing with illegal immigration—the amnesty. We need to deal with this issue, and not just at the border.

The Minister, as well as being responsible for immigration, is the acting entry clearance Minister, for the time being, so he knows that there is also a problem with that. I was aghast to hear of the number of students who come from Pakistan in particular, although as I said to the high commissioner last week, this is not an issue just for Pakistan because many countries are involved. The relevant numbers are 7,000 five years ago and 26,000 now. The journalist who wrote the report in *The Times* told us about these bogus colleges in Manchester that are supposed to admit only 50 such students but had 1,700 on the roll. These are serious issues and the Border and Immigration Agency must investigate them.

We take all the Minister's tough medicine today in saying to our constituents and those who seek to come here, "I am sorry that you must wait longer to become a British citizen and you have to do all these things: you have to obey the law, of course, and you have to be able to speak English." We accept everything that is being put upon a community such as mine in Leicester, where half the population has origins abroad. We accept all

[Keith Vaz]

that, but in return we want the Government to do more to tackle illegal immigration, so that those who come legally will be treated properly.

Tom Brake: I think that the right hon. Gentleman was about to conclude, but before he moves off the subject of tough medicine may I ask whether he agrees that perhaps, even for UK citizens, the tough medicine goes a little too far when it involves children in immigration detention centres? Does his immigration deal address that issue with the Minister?

Keith Vaz: I am happy to have given way to a member of the Select Committee. He is right in what he says, and it applies not only to children. Those who come to our surgeries, including the Minister's surgery in Oldham—I am so pleased that he is in this job, because every Friday he knows what the problems are—discuss not only children in detention centres, but people waiting for years for Miss Homer and her wonderful team to settle these cases. These people cannot work, as has been said by my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow and for Islington, North in every immigration debate that I have attended. We do not give these people the right to work. We keep them in destitution for four years because of our administrative inefficiency and eventually we ask them to leave. As we speed up the processing of those cases, we have to find a compromise that will allow them at least to take up work while their cases are being considered.

I take the point about my almost concluding as a hint that I should do so. A number of hon. Members have discussed the nature of active citizenship and the path to citizenship, and the Select Committee touched on that in its report on this Bill. May I remind the Minister of the reason why we had to conclude our investigation and then report? When this Bill was originally published the Minister did not know what was going into it, so we had no detail. A broad-brush approach was being taken and there was no detail for the Select Committee to scrutinise—that is why we had to conclude. As there was no information to allow us to scrutinise what the Government were proposing in the Bill, there was no point in our continuing our work and so we published our report.

The Committee said that it was extremely worried about this notion of active citizenship. Who is an active citizen? Are we putting on immigrants to this country—who choose to come here to become British citizens—a greater burden than we put on our own citizens? Are we going to ask such people to be better citizens than those born in this country? I was not born in this country, but my son and daughter have been born here. Does that mean that if I did not have citizenship when I came here I would have had to do more than someone who was born here? That is the problem with creating two classes of citizenship. Of course it is a great privilege to be a British citizen. My father and mother always wanted to be British citizens, and they wanted the same for their children. In a sense, those who come here as immigrants respect this country much more, because they know what a privilege it is to stay here. We need to address these issues, and people need to know what they must do in order to gain citizenship.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol, East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way just as he was about to rise to a crescendo at the end of his speech. Does he share my concern about those young people whose parents are long-term overstayers? I have a significant number in my constituency. The parents are mainly from Jamaica, and the children were born in this country. I met one young woman who did not even realise that she was not a British citizen until she applied to study English at university and was told that she would be classed as an overseas student. She was also told that she had to take the English language test and other tests, which would be a bit of a farce. Does he share my concern that if such people have to jump through various hoops to become British citizens, they will get entirely the wrong message?

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is right. We have to have rules—not everyone can arrive and suddenly become a British citizen. That does not happen in the US—people need a green card. If someone then commits a criminal offence, they are removed or do not get citizenship. However, we do need to be very compassionate in how we deal with such situations, especially when it comes to people—many from the Caribbean—who have lived here for many years, since Windrush, and have not bothered to get a passport or any documents and therefore have never become naturalised.

The Minister was very proactive in responding to my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow, who talked about the possibility of bogus voluntary organisations being created to provide certificates to prove to the Home Office that people had done their active citizenship service. We need to be careful about that and not just put that provision through on a statutory instrument. We should consult the public and Parliament, and we should then come up with criteria of which we can all be proud when we invite people to become equal citizens with us in this country. The Minister has given similar assurances in the past, which we have accepted readily and gladly, and we want to see that happen in this case.

There is still much work to be done on this Bill, and I hope that it will be improved in Committee. I hope that the Minister stays true to his promise to be open to suggestions so that we have a robust system, as we all want, and so that people who come here legally are properly treated, and those who come illegally, who are not asylum seekers and have no right to be here, are removed. It must also be a fair system so that we can retain the values that have made us one of the greatest countries in the world.

5.48 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is always a delight to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. He mentioned those who were born here who now wish to be naturalised and the requirements that they have to meet. Clause 41(3)(d) requires that a person has

"sufficient knowledge of the English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic language".

I am not sure that anybody coming to live in Wales or Scotland will have English and Scottish Gaelic or Welsh.

Another requirement is that a person

"has sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom."

I suspect that some people who were born in the UK would fail some of the questions asked of people who wish to come and live here. It is good to have such tests, and to expect people to integrate, to be able to communicate in the language of the country and to know about our customs and how things work, but it struck me as odd that we might be setting a much higher hurdle for those coming here than for those who happen to be born here. Perhaps we should consider setting such tests in schools, and ensuring that people can pass them.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman would have already failed that test. It is not Scottish "gay-lic" but Scottish Gaelic. I have taken the test—it is available on most of the social networking sites and I invite hon. Members to have a go; I failed. Perhaps it should come as a badge of honour for me, as a Scottish nationalist, to fail a Britishness test, but the test is very difficult. It would be worth while for hon. Members to have a go at it.

Mr. Evans: That says it all. My error would mean that I could not go and live in Scotland, and the hon. Gentleman's error would mean that he should not really be here. Perhaps, if he accepts my part of the deal—we will see.

This is an important debate. Immigration is clearly high in the minds of a lot of people at the moment, particularly at a time of recession—no one has mentioned immigration yet. Immigration is always on people's minds, but when the economy is booming it is less of a priority for a lot of people. Now, of course, there is a recession. Unemployment is high and it is growing. A lot of people look at immigration and see it as part of the problem. They think that they are unable to get jobs because so many people are coming here.

Let me return to the issue of the EU and the 10 countries that came in. Whereas Germany, France and the majority of the other countries had derogations to protect their economies, which allowed them to control who was coming in, as we have now done with Romania and—

Mr. Woolas: Bulgaria.

Mr. Evans: And Bulgaria. We have derogations in those cases, and I still think that we should have had derogations with those 10 countries, too. That might at least have made it somewhat easier.

Keith Vaz: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman for saying that. Does he not believe that since enlargement the arrival of eastern Europeans from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic has helped to boost our economy? Since the downturn, many of them have returned. Those who have stayed have filled jobs that they want to fulfil.

Mr. Evans: I will come back to that point in a moment. I just think that we should have been on an even keel with all the other countries in the EU. There should have been some consistency. It does not take a rocket scientist to see that if we and one other country had no derogations, we would be the major recipients of people coming from those 10 countries. However, I shall say more about that in a while.

The Government have passed seven pieces of immigration legislation since they came to power. With that in mind, I want to express my disappointment that despite acknowledgment on both sides of the House and in another place that our immigration laws are already extremely complicated, the Home Secretary has produced yet another layer of proposals. Indeed, the former Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne), said:

"This complexity reduces the efficiency of decision-making processes, resulting in delay and the risk of mistakes."

The principle, therefore, of a consolidatory or simplification Bill as proposed in July 2008 by the draft immigration and citizenship Bill was, I believe, welcomed. The Loyal Address made no mention of such a codifying Bill and so here we are today, wading through yet more supplementary legislation—the eighth time we have done so in the past 12 years.

I recognise that there are a variety of issues to discuss but, conscious of time, I shall limit myself to the proposals, or lack thereof, that cause me most concern. On immigration in general, we all need to recognise—particularly when we have EU and local authority elections coming up—that immigration should not be used as a tool by any political party just for party gain. I am clearly thinking about one particular party—the British National party—and about the UK Independence party to a lesser extent. I think that their views are not the best as far as a healthy economy is concerned, nor as far as people who wish to come and reside here legitimately are concerned. We should stress that. The debate about immigration must be sensible and grounded.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning UKIP for its policy of putting huge billboards in areas of quite high immigration—it certainly does so in my constituency—stating "Say no to unlimited immigration"? We certainly do not have unlimited immigration in the UK, and I can see that the only purpose is to stoke up resentment in those communities.

Mr. Evans: I know exactly what UKIP is doing, but I believe that the Government are partly responsible for not grasping the immigration problem earlier. That has given UKIP and the BNP an opportunity to use it as an argument against mass immigration into this country. If only the problem had been tackled years ago, I do not think that the attraction of those parties would be as high as we are led to believe in the national press.

There is no denying, as the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee has said, that immigration can be a boost to the economy, providing a highly skilled work force. We have seen that, in particular, with the Polish plumbers. Their skill is superb and people talk about them as a great asset to the country. Some people resent the fact that such workers have gone back to Poland or whatever country they came from. That was the difference in reaction between France and Britain. Britain was quite pleased, whereas France was not pleased about skilled workers coming into the country.

Keith Vaz: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way a second time. Of course, he will know that it was not just plumbers who came from Poland.

Mr. Evans: The tabloids used them as an example of what was happening. Clearly, a lot of other skilled people came from within the EU.

The Government estimate that there are up to 570,000 illegal immigrants in the UK. However, according to Migrationwatch UK a study by the London School of Economics in March 2009 suggested an estimate of more like 725,000, of whom 518,000 are based in London. Those figures prompt the question why on earth the Government have not included proposals to create an integrated border police capable of tackling this problem at source. That way, we would have sworn officers who could be recognised as such by the public. I would be interested to hear the Home Secretary's reasoning against a proposal that seems to go hand in hand with the Government's intention. The Government want to tighten up border security but do not want to be seen to use a Conservative initiative that would prove effective.

A border police force would have all the necessary powers to arrest, detain and prosecute offenders. Only such a fully integrated border police force will allow the development of specialist skills in fighting people trafficking, illegal immigration, and drug smuggling. Illegal immigrants, however, are part of a wider issue of population. The Office for National Statistics predicts that the population will increase by 4.4 million to 65 million by 2016 and reach 71 million by 2031. Immigration is expected to contribute some 47 per cent. of that growth. Is such growth acceptable and when will the Government wake up to the reality of the situation and institute plans that the Conservatives have suggested for annual limits on economic migration?

That aspect has been neatly summed up by the all-party group on balanced migration, which has stated:

"There are two litmus tests for immigration policy. First, it needs to tighten up immigration controls so that British unemployed people are given a fair crack at getting jobs. Second, it needs to control immigration so that the UK's population does not hit 70 million in 2028. This Bill passes neither of these tests."

So, with regards to immigration, the Bill is a glorious opportunity spurned. The Government have not taken the chance to introduce a border police force, and they have not seriously considered an annual limit on economic migration.

Members on all Benches, despite differences over content, would have welcomed a Bill that simplified the system. In fact, the Bill does little at all for our immigration situation save, as Migrationwatch UK has said, for

"making the task of consolidation of existing legislation yet more complicated."

Let me turn to naturalisation and citizenship. When the Bill came before the House of Lords, there was legitimate concern over the retrospective nature of the naturalisation process on migrants already in the UK and near the end of their qualification period under the old rules. I am amazed that the Government have not taken those concerns on board, and I gather that they wanted further debate on the amendment. In my opinion, there is no debate to be had. We are simply talking about the legitimate expectation of those people who are already here—it is an issue of fairness, and I have heard what the Home Secretary has said on the matter.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights expressed its concerns in 2007 about retrospective changes to migration rules in a report on the highly skilled migrant programme. It recently went on to say:

"We urge the Government not to repeat the unedifying spectacle of riding roughshod over migrants' legitimate expectations of settlement, which undermined many migrants' faith in the UK's commitment to basic fairness…We recommend that clear transitional provisions are made which meet the legitimate expectations of those already in the system."

The last time that the Government ignored that Committee, the Committee's concerns regarding highly skilled migrants were subsequently upheld by the High Court, and the Government were forced to do what they had failed to be persuaded to do in the first place, namely to honour the legitimate expectations of those who had planned their future lives in the UK on the basis of the law as it stood when they came to the country. That aspect was rightly picked up again by the House of Lords, and clause 39 is now in place, which provides that nothing in part 2 shall affect an application for indefinite leave to remain or for British citizenship made prior to the date on which part 2 is commenced. The clause also provides that nothing in part 2 shall affect an application for indefinite leave to remain that is made in the 12 months after the date on which part 2 is commenced.

My noble Friend Baroness Hanham led the argument on the issue in the other place, and her comments are equally pertinent today:

"The people who have faithfully adhered to the current rules and thought that they were firmly established on the road to citizenship should not now have the rug pulled from beneath their feet. They have an expectation of a timescale in which their naturalisation will be fulfilled." —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 March 2009; Vol. 709, c. 705.]

People would rightly feel angry, worried and betrayed by any retrospective moves. I have grave reservations about any retrospective legislation that would seek to punish or, in this case, place an even greater burden on people who have been following the law that the Government laid down.

I should like to turn to the provisions on the common travel area, which is made up of the UK, Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. All nationals of those countries can travel freely within them. The Government have said that the CTA is out of date, and that the privilege of movement within the CTA may be abused by others. Although we must be aware of the potential dangers, we must be proportionate—a factor of which the Government seem to have lost sight. The CTA has been of great benefit to the peoples of the whole of the British Isles since partition in 1921, and it even survived through world war two. The Government's proposal is unenforceable, as the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic does not exist in any physical form. There are hundreds of tiny lanes with no visible indication of a border, and all the military and security installations have been dismantled. What we should be looking at, in close collaboration with the Irish authorities, is putting in place an upgraded electronic border around the whole of the British Isles.

The Government's original suggestion in clause 46 was tantamount to the abolition of the common travel area, because the re-imposition of immigration controls

would mean that entitlement to travel would have to be proven at the border, and so the panoply of immigration controls would operate there. As Justice has said,

"immigration controls should only be introduced into a previous common travel zone where a case of strict necessity (rather than mere administrative convenience) can be made out."

The Government have manifestly failed to justify that action. The amendments put in place by the House of Lords must stand.

The Lords Select Committee on the Constitution considered part 3 in detail. It said:

"It is clear to us that the policy-making process that has led to clause 46 (now clause 48) has not been informed by any real appreciation of the constitutional status of the Crown dependencies or the rights of free movement of Islanders."

If the Government plan to reintroduce the provisions, perhaps the Secretary of State will tell the House what steps she and her Department have taken to rectify their lack of constitutional awareness.

In short, I believe that the House of Lords has seen through a piece of legislation that is pretty shoddy in parts. The Bill is not brave enough to take on proposals that make sense, such as a border police force or an annual limit on economic migration, nor does it consolidate the maze of existing immigration legislation. I urge Members of all parties not to vote in favour of any retrospective legislation on naturalisation, which would be grossly unfair and disproportionate. Likewise, the Government have not made a good enough case for all but removing the CTA, and our noble Friends' amendments must stand.

6.3 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). I am sure that if he sat the citizenship test, he would do so in Welsh, and I would certainly do so, too. The last point that he raised, on the common travel area, is one that I want to explore further, but first I want to welcome many measures in the Bill. The citizenship part of it, which many people have talked about, is complex, but it is a move in the right direction, which I welcome. I also welcome part 1 of the Bill, which is about advancing the UK Border Agency. I have seen some of the successes. As I mentioned in an intervention on the shadow Home Secretary, I have watched it since its inception and seen it produce very good results in the port of Holyhead in my constituency. It is a very large port; some 2 million passengers a year travel through it, as does a lot of cargo. A lot of highly intelligent work is done in the port by immigration authorities, working with the police and the UK Border Agency.

I very much welcome the fact that in some areas, the issue of who is responsible for what will be sorted out. I am sure that that is the intention of the Bill. Before the UK Border Agency was set up, I recall talking to both the police and Customs, and noted how concerned they were that the agency would not work with them. I think that those fears have now been allayed; the agency is working well. I talk to people in the specialist units in the port and to people at the dedicated security posts that North Wales police has in my area. Those people do an excellent job, and they are specialised, so I do not really see the need for the single, all-encompassing body that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley has mentioned. I see the police working alongside the UK Border Agency and immigration authorities. That works, and I think that it can work better in future. However, I welcome part 1, which will consider administrative areas, so as to tidy up the relationship between Customs, the UK Border Agency and the police.

The port of Holyhead, which is in my constituency, as I have said, is the second or third-largest port in the United Kingdom. It is certainly the largest port on the western seaboard, with a considerable amount of traffic, and it is also a major employer. It has potential for growth in freight and in passengers, which will put greater burdens on the UK Border Agency and immigration authorities.

I want to concentrate on the controversial measures to introduce immigration controls for journeys within the CTA especially with regard to journeys from the Republic of Ireland. The measures will have a profound effect on the port of Holyhead, and indeed on all Welsh ports that have historical trade with the Republic of Ireland, and that are major employers in the area. I am mindful of the balance between providing security and ensuring efficient freight and passenger movement. Getting that balance right is very tricky, but the port of Holyhead is used to striking the right balance.

Throughout the 20th century—for many years—Welsh and Irish ports have had to deal with the security implications of the Irish question, and with the movement of people predominantly by sea, and they have done that very well. The port of Holyhead is on the central corridor, and has been the favoured route to the Republic of Ireland, and for Irish people coming to the United Kingdom. There remains a high security alert today, as there was throughout the most recent Irish troubles. The port is used to dealing with those high security alerts. These days, when I visit the port, I see for myself the work done by front-line people to keep our borders secure. I pay tribute to all those involved with front-line immigration, counter-terrorism and other services, because they do an excellent job. Too often, we deal with the details of what they do, but do not give them credit for what they achieve.

The Welsh Affairs Committee, of which I am a member, is undertaking an inquiry on Welsh ports. One of the areas that we will touch on is the CTA, so the subject is appropriate to this debate. We visited the port of Holyhead, and we intend to go to other ports in Swansea and Pembrokeshire to look at the effect that the CTA has on the economies of the western seaboard of Wales. We have talked with port operators, immigration and border agencies, and counter-terrorism units about the importance of the security measures in the CTA. This debate is timely, because I have strong concerns about the issue.

I shall use a local example. In the port of Holyhead, there are, as I have already said, good relationships between the people at dedicated security posts, the special branch police, the UK Border Agency officers and additional UK Border Agency hit squads that deal with the area, and have done for many years. Their work is predominantly intelligence-based, but a lot of it is just carrying out spot checks on people and cargo going through the UK ports. They may also have heard intelligence, gathered either in the Republic of Ireland or on the continent, before they intervene. They have a

[Albert Owen]

good success rate, and that system works. It is important that we stress the fact that it does work. There are huge amounts of additional seizures. Huge numbers of lorries are intercepted, and illegal immigrants are taken out of them. The job that the UK Border Agency undertakes, working with others, has been a huge success, and I pay tribute once again to the people on the front line.

Like all ports, Holyhead has to comply with stringent regulations. The EU security directive, which is soon to be introduced, will make it even more complex for ports to deal with EU-wide legislation. Not only UKBA and customs and immigration officers, but all staff are trained in port security. Port staff provide additional security to make the ports secure and to deal with trafficking and so on. They are all trained to international ship and port facility security code standards. The officers are paid by the port, and a considerable sum is involved—in the case of Holyhead in my constituency, it is £750,000 a year, so an additional cost would be incurred if new measures were introduced to secure the borders of the Republic of Ireland and additional immigration measures were introduced between the Republic of Ireland and Wales.

I have outlined the significant measures that are already in place in the CTA. The Government have indeed carried out a consultation to abolish the CTA between the Republic and the UK. To be fair to them, the consultation was wide-ranging, and they listened to the concerns of industry and dropped the proposal for fixed immigration controls on all passengers and freight to and from the Irish ports. However, having listened to the Home Secretary, I am concerned that the Government intend to reintroduce the proposal, although it was defeated in the other place.

The proposal to introduce an identity card system and passport requirements for all travellers would be an additional burden on the ports. The proposal on carrier liability, with a £2,000 fine for every passenger who fails to carry a passport or an ID card, would impose additional unnecessary burdens.

I am slightly concerned about the imposition of e-Borders. If there were a level playing field and basic information across the whole European Union, it would be a great advantage, but I am concerned that the omission of the border between the Republic and the north will displace some of the problems and therefore hope that a level playing field will be established. I am concerned that the huge number of seizures in the ports of Holyhead and Dublin and other ports will move elsewhere as tighter regulations and measures are introduced between the Republic and the UK. People will simply drift across the border from the Republic to the north and then across to the UK without any checks. That is the real fear for many of us. It is not enough to have tight borders, as we might open the problem up somewhere else. Anyone who has recently been to the Republic of Ireland will know that the north and south are very much unified when it comes to tourism, for instance. The borders are flexible and open.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I hope that like me, the hon. Gentleman is a good rugby supporter. Many teams are all-Ireland teams, as he well knows. Does he not agree that it is nonsense to put the cart before the horse and try to deal with border controls by requiring identity checks at places such as Holyhead before holding a debate about whether we should keep—I support this—the CTA, encompassing the whole of Ireland and the whole of the UK?

Albert Owen: We have discussed this before. If the new measures on immigration control and everything else are introduced, they should apply between the Republic and the north of Ireland, or not at all. I am worried about the drift from the Republic to the north and across to Scotland.

There is an economic argument, too. Many carriers that carry cargo to and from Ireland on a regular basis will favour the north, because it will be quicker to get through the ports. They will travel from the south to the north and over into Scotland or, indeed, the north-west of England. Welsh ports would lose out economically, and it is a serious concern, because they would face the additional cost of running the schemes proposed by the Government and a possible loss of revenue. That is why I am very worried that the Government's introduction of the measures will impact severely on the port of Holyhead.

No one is suggesting that Welsh ports should be a soft touch, but as I have tried to demonstrate, security at ports such as Holyhead in my constituency has been tried and tested over many years. It needs to be improved further, with co-operation, as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley has said, between the Irish and UK Governments. It should be an intelligence-led national and international network. That is the way forward: we should have more ad hoc intelligence-based work at the ports, but it is important to keep the CTA as it is, for the reasons that I have given.

Ports remain the life blood of the economy of the British Isles, and the CTA has stood the test of time. It has withstood the Irish problems—wartime was the only time when it was not in place as a result of the Republic's neutrality. Since 1921, it has served well the port authorities and the security forces at the ports, which do an excellent job, and that should continue. I welcome further discussion with the Minister to try to allay the fears that I have raised on behalf not only of port owners but of people who work on the front line at the port of Holyhead in my constituency and at many other Welsh ports.

6.16 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). Occasionally, I have used the ferry from his constituency across to Ireland—I always enjoy a little excursion across the Irish sea. From these Benches, may we pay tribute to the Home Secretary, who is expected to depart from the Home Office? She has always been fair and courteous to members of the minority parties. Her predecessor went on to become chair of Celtic football club in Glasgow—I do not know whether there is a vacancy in the other half of the old firm or whether it is something in which she is interested, but I am sure that she will have a fine career ahead of her when she steps down.

These debates have a depressing familiarity to them. We hear, primarily from Conservative Members, about all the problems and issues to do with the overheated south-east of England and why there is a need for

further immigration controls and a cap on numbers. On the other side, we hear about half-hearted measures to frustrate and thwart migrants to the UK and occasionally, from me, there is a little voice trying to say, "Well, let's think about the other nations of the United Kingdom, because they never get a look in at all." England may indeed be overheating in terms of immigration, but Scotland is suffering structural depopulation. We are being served by a UK immigration policy that goes nowhere near meeting our specific requirements and needs.

Our population will fall below the iconic 5 million mark by 2017. By 2041, the population of Scotland may in fact fall to 4.5 million. At the same time, the population of England is expected to grow by about 10 million, but we will lose 0.5 million people. We are not the only country to suffer from structural depopulation, as many European nations are facing the same issues and challenges. The only difference between those nations and us is the fact that they can do something about it: they can design immigration policies to try to counter those problems and put in place a system that will see them through. We cannot do that. Doubly worse is the fact that we have an immigration policy designed for another nation that faces exactly the opposite range of problems and challenges. We have to try to make our way through that—no wonder that we do not have a chance of trying to address our particular challenges.

If there is one thing that separates Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom, it is immigration, and if there is one thing that we cannot fix, it is the demographic challenge facing our population. If we do not do so, however, we will face severe challenges and problems, which will impact on our entire society. There will be an impact on our economy, because there will be fewer people to do the vital jobs; depopulation will impact on our social services, because there will be fewer people working for them; and it will impact all the way through Scottish society and our community. We need Scottish solutions to a distinct Scottish problem, but we just cannot provide them because we do not have the powers, the instruments or the means at our disposal to try to address that problem.

The Bill falls within a range of measures designed to address UK immigration issues. None of them has served Scotland. The latest wheeze is the points-based system, which will make matters worse in Scotland. As the Minister and Members who have taken part in the debate know, the proposed system is almost identical to the Australian points-based system, save in one key regard—the Australian system allows for the devolution of immigration powers to individual state Governments. They can set their own criteria for allowing immigrants to come into those specific states if they fail the general Australian criteria.

States such as Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria, which face the same sort of challenges as Scotland, can allow people in and have their needs met. Prospective immigrants who fail to meet the criteria elsewhere in Australia have the opportunity to go to those states, helping them significantly with their demographic challenges. What we would do to have that in Scotland! What we could achieve if we were able to do that!

We would be able to address some of our problems with even limited devolution of immigration power. We could try and turn things around, address our structural population decline and start to deal with some of the serious problems that we will face down the line, which will impact on our economy and our community. Why, oh why, when we copy the Australian system, can we not copy that key facet and allow Scotland and the other nations of the United Kingdom to try and make some sense of the difficulties confronting them? I do not get it at all. The Australian system is a fine system. Why not go the whole hog, make sure that we copy every facet of it, and give us a break? We need a break because we have severe problems.

The points-based system gets in the way of the little bit of competitive advantage that we had with skilled migrants. We had a Fresh Talent initiative which gave us a slight advantage over the rest of the UK, because we were able to attract some skilled migrants to Scotland, but that has gone. Tier 4 has subsumed all that. The whole of the UK now has the same sort of structure as we had under Fresh Talent, so the slight advantage that we had in attracting skilled migrants is gone. Scotland now has no advantage whatever.

The points-based system is also getting in the way of retaining skilled migrants in Scotland. I cite the example of my constituent, Swarthwick Salins. The Minister might remember the case—it was all over the Scottish newspapers—which arose in my constituency of Perth. A respected academic, with a PhD from St. Andrews university, and a pillar of the community, he was going to get booted out for the sake of £80. For the lack of a measly £80, he was to be separated from his three Perth-born children and booted out.

Swarthwick Salins was on tier 4 and he satisfied all the other points-based criteria when it came to assessing whether he could remain in Scotland, other than the financial criterion. When the UK Border Agency got round to looking at his bank account, he had only £721 for two weeks, whereas he required £800. On that basis, he was to be booted out. Swarthwick Salins is exactly the type of person we want to come to Scotland. He is the type of person that we need. Instead of booting him out and harassing him, we should be attracting him to Scotland. We should be saying, "We need you here," and we should be doing all we can to retain him, but instead we try and boot the man out. What a shambles.

It took a community campaign and the intervention of the First Minister of Scotland, working in my office, to have that ridiculous decision reversed. Thank goodness it was. I am beginning to wonder how many other Swarthwick Salins are being harassed like that in Scotland. It is not good enough. We need to make sure that we do something about it.

We are supposed to have some sort of advantage as a result of the Migration Advisory Committee's list of professions that are allowed to come to Scotland, over and above those allowed into the rest of the United Kingdom. Which professions has the council selected for us? Fish processors and fish filleters. Those are all we get selected as preferred professions, and that is supposed to address some of the massive issues facing us. It is as pathetic as putting a finger in a dam. It gives us no competitive advantage.

Mr. Woolas: I am sorry the hon. Gentleman is ridiculing the fish filleters. We included that profession in response to representations. I would be interested in looking at

[Mr. Woolas]

the idea of Scottish skills. We have had meetings with the Scottish Government about that, and the Migration Advisory Committee will consider that issue.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the Minister for that positive contribution. I hope he is sincere. I would be delighted to meet him and go over some of the issues. There are things that can be done, as the Australian points-based system has demonstrated. There are ways in which the Minister and his Department could aid us. All it requires is the will and the determination to get it right. If he wants to work with me and our party to try and achieve that, I am more than happy to do so.

The Minister seems to be pointing to the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green). Perhaps that is an invitation to the official Opposition too. Work with us. Help us. For goodness sake, we have issues and problems. The Minister and his shadow have the opportunity to solve them, and I challenge both of them to work with us and help us resolve some of the problems. Let us see if we can make a difference to the problems that face us.

That brings us to what is proposed in the Bill. Will it help Scotland? No, it will not make a blind bit of difference. It is just another Bill to frustrate and thwart people who are trying to secure permanent status in the United Kingdom. All it does is make smaller hoops for them to jump through and a higher bar for them to get over. It is not trying to improve the situation for any constituent part of the United Kingdom.

The phrase "earned citizenship"—what a phrase!—suggests that migrants must prove their worth. The implication is that they are automatically a less deserving or less trustworthy group than those who are born in Britain. There is also the idea of probationary citizenship, which is an entirely new concept to me. It suggests an immigration limboland—an immigration neverland, if you like.

Then there is the proposal for enforced volunteering for those wishing to obtain citizenship. I thought volunteering meant offering one's services free, without any sort of force. The whole idea of volunteering has been turned on its head by the concept of earned citizenship. It is a potentially dangerous and damaging proposal.

There are changes in the number of days a person applying for naturalisation will have to be present in the UK for each year of the qualifying period. That, again, will make a difference to people who are trying to get in. All this is designed to frustrate people trying to get UK citizenship. The basis of the Bill seems to be the hope that people will be so frustrated and thwarted by the whole process that they will go away. The Bill tries to put them off, not to improve our immigration status.

It is the impact on refugees that I find most concerning. All the language about earning the right to stay and probationary periods runs totally counter to the spirit of the UK Government's commitment to protect refugees and to fulfil their obligations under the refugee convention and the European convention on human rights. Granting long-term secure protection to refugees who are fleeing persecution and whose lives are sometimes in danger is inconsistent with the idea that refugees must earn that protection, and it goes against article 34 of the UN convention, which requires signatory states to encourage or facilitate naturalisation.

Massive issues remain about the welfare of asylum seekers, particularly those with children. We heard some fine remarks from Labour Members about that. There is widespread revulsion at the locking up of children, dawn raids on asylum-seeking children in Scotland and their detention in the former prison of Dungavel. We had assurances from the Secretary of State for Scotland that the detention of asylum seekers' children would end, but in the past couple of weeks another Ivory Coast family were subject to not quite a dawn raid, because such raids now take place 15 minutes after dawn, and rounded up and put in the Dungavel detention centre.

That was the case of the Gaye family in Scotland, who are awaiting deportation back to the Ivory Coast. That should never have happened. The child has already been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder caused by previous interaction with the UK Border Agency. I have seen a letter from the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who is now Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, saying that any asylum seeker and any asylum seeker's child who are subject to any medical intervention or casework should not be subject to deportation. That seems to go counter to what is happening in that case.

I know that Members of the Scottish Parliament have written to the Minister about the case, but they have not even had the courtesy of a reply. That was about two weeks ago. They were told that they would get a reply within five days. Nothing. They got back in touch again. Nothing. When will the Minister get round to replying to those people about the Gaye case? The case is getting wide publicity in Scotland and causing anxiety and concern about what is happening to such families.

Also in the past week, we found out that another family were subject to a near-dawn raid and to detention in Dungavel, so the assurances from the Secretary of State for Scotland are worth nothing at all. Scotland wants an end to dawn raids and to detention in Dungavel. That is what was promised and that is what should now be delivered.

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that clause 57, which will put the welfare of the child first, is likely to make a great deal of difference to the situations that he describes? Is it not to be welcomed?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. I do welcome that provision, but let us just do it; let us not just talk about it and include it in legislation. We have already had assurances that there will be no further detention of children in Dungavel, but it still goes on, so I shall believe it when I see it. There are solutions, however; the hon. Lady is right, and I am pleased about that aspect of the Bill.

In Scotland, we are trying to develop our own Scottish solution, because there has been widespread revulsion throughout the community at the detention of children. Colleagues in the Scottish Government have been trying to address the situation, and they have worked with the UK Border Agency and Glasgow city council on a family return scheme. Instead of dawn raids and detention,

the scheme puts a number of families into flats, where they are supported by skilled and dedicated staff who will prepare them, talk them through the issues and get them ready if they have to return to their home country. Is not that the way to deal with such cases?

Mr. Woolas: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and I understand the sentiment. We have run projects as alternatives to detention, but the problem with one project was that, of the 32 families who signed up, only one turned up at the airport. It is a serious problem. If there is not to be detention, there has to be a serious alternative. I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the Minister for those remarks, and I agree about the challenges and problems that must be addressed.

Damian Green: I rise as a constituency Member, because the alternative-to-detention project that the Government started took place in my constituency and was pursued, at best, half-heartedly. It did not clearly engage any particularly serious part of the Government's thinking—if, indeed, it was a serious alternative to detention. I suspect that Members from all parts of the House want desirable alternatives to detention, but they have never been properly set out or tried. The experiment in my constituency was nothing like long enough, well resourced enough or serious enough to answer the question about whether we can have a proper alternative.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to both Front-Bench spokesmen for their views on the matter, because it is important that we find a solution. Detention is no longer acceptable. It is certainly no longer acceptable to the people of Scotland, and we must find an alternative.

The Scottish Government have devoted £125,000 of resources to try to make the family return scheme work. Such expenditure is required, because the current situation has to end. It is not good enough that we lock up children, put them behind bars and subject them to dawn raids; that policy must end. We should consider whatever is required to move on and create alternatives, and I am grateful for the enthusiasm of both Front-Bench spokesmen in trying to tackle the problem. There are issues, as the Minister said, but I am sure that with the right type of commitment, they can be overcome.

I accept that immigration and citizenship tests are required to assess the quality and worth of people who apply to become UK citizens. I had a joke with the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) about the citizenship test, but I took it and it is readily available on several social networking websites, so I encourage Members to have a look at it. I failed it and, as I said to the hon. Gentleman, as a Scottish National party Member, perhaps that is no bad thing; it would probably be expected. Seriously, however, where there are references to the Welsh language and to Scottish Gaelic, as I correctly reminded the hon. Gentleman, why cannot we have a test that is more attuned to the community in which people will live? It is a UK-wide test, and token questions about Welsh and Gaelic are flung in, but people who are expected to come and live in Scotland quickly become familiar with Scottish communities, heritage and cultural values. Why cannot that test be more in line with the community in which those people will live? Why cannot it be exclusively like that?

When minority communities settle in Scotland, they quickly identify with Scotland and become patriotic. In fact, some of the most patriotic Scots are from some of our new communities in our big cities, and we take immense pride in that. We took immense pride in the election of Bashir Ahmad as the first Scottish Asian MSP, and that is the type of contribution that we want. What is wrong with that? I ask the Minister directly and hope that he might address the question in his winding-up speech: why can we not have more national and, perhaps, regional-specific tests to secure the type of citizenship that reflects properly the communities in which people will live? There is no point in having a test that has nothing to do with the countries in which people will live.

In conclusion, I shall not oppose the Bill—although I do not think that there will be a Division this evening, anyway, so I shall not have the opportunity to do so. I hope that when Members consider the Bill in Committee, however, they will remember that this is a United Kingdom of nations, and that our immigration policy cannot be the preserve and domain of the south-east of England, with all its issues and pressures. The policy has to get beyond Watford, and we have to start looking at the other nations. Scotland is suffering really badly, and our economy will continue to suffer unless the immigration issue is properly addressed. I therefore appeal to the Minister, and to the hon. Member for Ashford, who might get the Minister's job in the course of the next year, to think about the other nations and regions of the United Kingdom when putting through legislation, because so far it has not been good enough.

6.35 pm

Dr. Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast, South) (SDLP): Much has been said, and I have a few comments to make. This is a Bill about which I and my party have some very real concerns, but I hope to deal with them in more detail either later or on another occasion. I want to be constructive and to acknowledge some positive features of the Bill. I particularly welcome the fact—to which other Members have referred—that, in line with our international commitments, protections against trafficking are being extended, so that it will be an offence to traffic a very small child. The loopholes that prevented prosecutions in that area needed to be closed, and I am glad to see that the Bill, and clause 56 in particular, does that.

I also welcome the fact that a new statutory duty is being placed on the UK Border Agency to safeguard the welfare of children. However, it must be a qualified welcome, because, in line with the UN convention on the rights of the child, it is not merely the welfare of the child that should be safeguarded; the primary consideration must be the best interests of the child.

Unfortunately, I also have major and serious concerns about other aspects of the Bill. One of my concerns is about accountability. The Bill means that, in practice, UK Border Agency officials will have substantially increased powers, because they will be able to perform certain functions that, until now, HM Revenue and Customs officials have exercised. As I interpret the Bill, UK Border Agency officials will be able to arrest, detain, search, inspect, seize goods, impound vehicles and require third parties to give evidence. We should have no doubt that, in effect, those are policing powers, and that is why UKBA officials should be subject to police-style accountability.

[Dr. Alasdair McDonnell]

First, the officials should be subject to police and criminal evidence codes of practice. The Government have taken a step in the right direction by giving the Secretary of State the power to apply those codes to immigration officers, but the Secretary of State should not be able to pick and mix; the police and criminal evidence codes should apply in their entirety. If, for any practical or legitimate reason, separate or extra provision needs to be made, above and beyond the average for immigration, the Secretary of State should come to the House and specifically seek approval for it on a case-by-case basis.

Secondly, immigration officers in Northern Ireland must be subject to the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, as are ordinary police officers in Northern Ireland. The police ombudsman has become a distinguished figure in Northern Ireland and does a very good job. I remind the House that on 19 July 2006 the then police ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, announced that the Government had asked her office to deal with serious complaints against immigration officers in Northern Ireland. That was explicitly stated in her fifth annual report.

There is nothing revolutionary or radical in my suggestion. In the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, provision was made to ensure that officers of the Serious Organised Crime Agency were subject to the police ombudsman. That sets the precedent, and my party and I believe that the provision should be applied to immigration officers, as the Government appeared to concede in 2006. I note that provision is made for allowing the investigating functions of the Independent Police Complaints Commission to be expanded. That is welcome. The comparable role in Northern Ireland is that of the police ombudsman, and I urge the Minister to consider some of the relevant aspects as he takes the Bill forward.

With rights come responsibilities; if officials are to have rights, there must be an independent mechanism to hold them responsible. However, just as rights bring responsibilities, responsibilities bring rights. That is why I am concerned by the proposal for probationary citizenship. It means that for a period, a person will have the duties of citizenship without any corresponding rights, because their citizenship will be conditional. To begin with, that devalues the whole notion of citizenship. Citizenship has a widely understood meaning and we have to be careful about tinkering with it or changing it, lest we undermine it. Anybody who has citizenship is understood to have the same rights and responsibilities as anybody else, but probationary citizenship turns that concept on its head. It is, in effect, second-class citizenship. We have to be careful about that, because I do not think that the Bill intends to create second-class citizens who might never assume full citizenship.

Some of the criteria for the acquisition of citizenship also seem unfair. For example, a person who has successfully applied for refugee status is not entitled to have account taken of the period spent awaiting that determination. Under the Geneva convention of 1951, refugee status is declaratory. Therefore refugees should be entitled to have account taken of the period—sometimes many years long—for which they were in the state awaiting a determination of their claims.

Those who do not undertake voluntary activity of some kind will be penalised and have to wait longer to acquire citizenship. In principle, I would not take issue with that; in practice, however, I feel that I must. It is important to ensure that those with caring responsibilities, particularly women, do not find themselves severely disadvantaged; they may well become so if they are caring for families, young children or elderly parents.

Finally, and above all, I am concerned about the whole question of the common travel area, an issue raised by many. As Members know, the only land border in these islands is that between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. There has been a common travel area for 88 years. I welcome clause 51, which was inserted in another place. It makes it clear that those arriving by land—over the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic—should not be subject to immigration control. That would safeguard the common travel area, and I hope that the Government will accept the provision in due course. There is no evidence of lax immigration control in the Irish Republic—nor have the Government suggested that there is. Indeed, immigration legislation is currently going through the Irish Parliament, and in my view it represents in some ways one of the most draconian approaches in Europe; it would even make it a crime for somebody to be in the state unlawfully.

The common travel area reflects the particular and enduring history of these islands and the desirability of ensuring free movement across the land border between us. I hope that the Government will accept the will of those in another place who inserted the clause, and continue to protect the common travel area. Like many others, I believe that it has served us well for the past 88 years. It should be safeguarded for the future.

6.44 pm

Mr. Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the third immigration Bill on which I have spoken since I became a Member of Parliament four years ago. I have a suspicion that I will be serving in Committee; I shall bring to bear the collective knowledge that I have collated in the past four years. Although this debate is not particularly well attended, it is nice to have heard so many differing views put so sensibly by colleagues on both sides of the House. Discussion of immigration is often heated. It is incumbent on us to discuss it with passion, yes, but also moderately.

I did not go into politics to become an immigration officer. I help people with their immigration cases, but I believe that the job would be better done by people at the Home Office. Like all Members here today and many who are not, I am terribly concerned about how long it takes to process immigration cases. It can take many years for a case to be concluded, and I do not think that that is fair on those who seek to remain in this country. We need to speed up the process—to be humane, if nothing else—and when people are denied the right to remain here, they should be removed quickly. If people are to have confidence in the immigration system, they have to know that it works and that a refusal will mean that the relevant person will be required to leave the country. Too often, people feel that a refusal basically means that the person concerned just disappears into the ether, never to be seen again. We need a quick and humane immigration system.

Unlike the Minister, I am not an expert on immigration, and I know that words are easily said. However, I hope that the Minister's Government and any future Government will bring additional resources to bear on the issue. As a great nation, we owe it to our citizens to control and manage our borders. There has been great concern in my constituency, and in those of many other Members, about the porous nature of our borders. I am a great supporter of the idea of a well-funded and well-resourced border police force, which would manage and control our borders. It would stop undesirable people—those who want to cause this country harm, such as some whom we have seen in the past few years—from getting into the country. It would also be aware of who was entering, and manage people's entry into and exit from this country. When we read the newspapers and talk to people in business, we hear too often about what happens when illegal immigrants and workers are caught: the police turn up and, basically, give them a travel warrant to Croydon. Those stories may be apocryphal, but they are out there. We need to be aware of them and of the concerns that they create, and we need to address those concerns.

The Bill does not have all the answers; I do not think it a particularly good Bill. At least, however, the sentiment is there; at least we are trying to point in the right direction. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) said in his opening remarks, we have, unfortunately, had eight immigration Bills in the past 13 years. That suggests that we are not getting things right. What we really need is a very good immigration Bill in the near future—but I am not sure that this is that Bill. It fills a hole at the moment, but I fear that we will be here discussing another immigration Bill in the next year or two. That might be no bad thing, because our constituents' concerns continue, and it is incumbent on us all to address those concerns; we must not only be seen to address them, but actually address them. In that way, our constituents will see a material change in how immigration is handled in this country, in how our borders are policed and patrolled and in how people are treated once they are here.

Yes, we want to be fair; we must be fair—it is a great British trait. However, when someone is denied the right to stay here we must remove them quickly, and be seen to do so. As the Minister and my party's Front Benchers recognise, we need settled communities that rub along well together. One of the concerns of the past few years, as immigration rates have increased, is that we have put some extreme stress on communities. That has created divisions and some unrest—not as much as some media commentators would have us believe, but there is nevertheless plenty to be concerned about. We in this place need to be alive to those concerns, because if we are not, there is another party that will play on them. I do not want to mention its name in the run-up to European and county council elections, but we know that it exists, and that it is very dishonest. It plays on people's very worst fears, and we must not continue to create a space that allows it to prosper. I am convinced that in the next couple of days the great British people will rise up and give that party a firm thumbs down.

The Bill skates around the issue of population projections and how many people we want coming into this country. Undoubtedly, that concern needs to be addressed more fully than it is in the Bill. This country cannot grow its population indefinitely. It is projected that in the next 30 years we will have 80 million people living in the United Kingdom. Most of those additional 15 million people will come to the east and the south-east. I do not think that is a good thing or a sustainable model. I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and I very much recognise his concerns about Scotland, which is crying out for people—additional human resources to allow it to grow and become an even greater country than it already is. The Bill does not make provision for that to happen, so his concerns were well placed. I would just say to him—without trying your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I know I frequently do when I am speaking in this Chamber—that when I retire I have every intention of moving up to his beautiful country and sitting on an island called Islay fishing and indulging in all that beautiful scenery. However, I am well aware that he is not looking for retirees but for able young and middle-aged people with skills.

The Bill refers to points-based systems—people earning points to come to this country. We can be a bit selfish in this country, in that we can afford to take the very best of the people who want to come here. That is a fairly ruthless approach to immigration, but it is one that we can legitimately take. The idea that immigration does not help this country is complete nonsense, and I am delighted that no Member of Parliament has put forward that thesis today. This country has undoubtedly benefited from immigration: one need only go to our hospitals and care homes to realise that. There are huge advantages to immigration, and of course we will never turn our back on those advantages.

However, we need to be selective and to understand that there is concern about a growing population and the allocation of resources, so that when people come to this country, the existing population, regardless of their race, creed or colour, should not feel at a disadvantage. When there is strife within a community, it is often the settled immigrant population that gets it in the neck most. We need to be mindful of the people already living here and ensure that we meet their needs so that they do not feel disadvantaged by immigration.

I am quite attracted by the idea of earned citizenship. I think this country is a great country—a fabulous country. It is not just a good country; it is a great country. It is truly the United Kingdom, with Great Britain in there somewhere. It is a great privilege to be able to come to this country and earn that passport, which is recognised around the world, and to be able to call oneself British, or English—or Scottish, even, if one wants to do that. The idea of earned citizenship is not a bad one; it has many merits and advantages. As we know, if we have earned something we often take greater pride in it than if it is given to us. However, I am concerned about the idea of forced volunteering. Volunteering should be voluntary. It cannot be forced on someone; it has to be something that they want to do in actively deciding to give something back to their community. Although I understand the sentiment entirely, I am not sure that it sits very well in this Bill.

If Charles Walker were Prime Minister, as he will be in a few years' time—

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): Next week!

Mr. Walker: I could well be. If I were, what would I do to allow people to earn citizenship? I would have four simple criteria. I would require people to obey the law; most reasonable English, British or Scottish people would expect that as well. I would require people to speak the language, because someone cannot participate in the life of this wonderful country and the wonderful communities that make it up unless they can speak the language. I would want people to be able to pay their way—to put something back into this great country of ours and make a contribution through taxes to the things that we really value, such as the NHS. Finally—perhaps this is the hardest criterion to meet—I want people who come here wanting to be citizens of this country to embrace our values—not to turn their backs on their values and heritage but to embrace our values, such as tolerance, fair-mindedness, freedom to express oneself, and freedom to marry whoever one wants to marry. Those are all things that we take for granted but which make this country so special—a place that young people from around the world want to come to. Those criteria are quite testing, but not impossible. Most people should be able to meet them.

What I love most about this country is our sense of fair play. We love people who try and people who contribute. That is a truly wonderful thing. If people who come to this country are seen to be trying and contributing, we will embrace them and make them part of our communities, and they will embrace other immigrants who come here and then in turn become part of the larger community.

This is not a great Bill, and I think that we will have another immigration Bill in due course. I hope that if there is a future Conservative Government, we will have only one such Bill, or perhaps two, in a decade; to have only one would be a good start, because of course we want less legislation. However, at least the Bill points us in the right direction, and now we have to travel in that direction far more quickly and effectively than we have done in past years.

6.58 pm

Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker).

I should like to start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. She and I came to this House together in 1997. I am proud that a Member of that intake became the first female Home Secretary; and she has always been such a dignified, courteous and concerned Home Secretary.

I want to talk specifically about how the Bill affects children and families. I warmly welcome clause 57, which my right hon. Friend mentioned in her introductory speech. It is a very important clause that places a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that certain specified functions in matters of immigration, asylum and nationality are carried out

"having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the United Kingdom".

That is similar to the duty in section 11 of the Children Act 2004. It is a big step forward, and I really welcome it.

I also welcome the measures in the Bill to tackle child trafficking more effectively. In November 2008, the Government withdrew the reservation about children in the immigration and asylum system that they had made when they ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child. In addition, in January this year the Minister for Borders and Immigration launched the code of practice on keeping children safe from harm in the migration system. The Children's Commissioner for England, Sir Al Aynsley-Green, has also championed the cause of children in the immigration system and has recently produced a report about it.

Progress has been made on this important issue, and the clause is important, but we need to see its effects on the ground. My belief is that children in the immigration and asylum system should be treated in the same way that we would expect our own children to be treated. The way they have been treated has been a long-standing problem, but I hope that it is now on the way to resolution. There are still concerns, including about the fact that children are being put in detention centres at all. Other matters have been raised, such as access to benefits, the ability to live above the poverty line and the problems of destitute families and individuals not being addressed in the Bill. The welfare clause is needed, because there has been great concern about how children have been treated in the asylum and immigration system.

I am particularly concerned about the practice of picking up families with children in dawn raids, about which there has already been some discussion today. That has happened to very young children on several occasions in Cardiff, when people have come to their homes early in the morning. I recently heard of the experience of a six-year-old child and his mother who were woken up at half-past 4 in the morning, with seven or eight officers present to escort them to Yarl's Wood. That caused huge upset to the mother, the child, their neighbours and the child's school friends. I do not find it acceptable that that is how we are treating our children in this country today. I am sure that Ministers must agree with that, and I am pleased that this welfare clause is in the Bill. I hope that it will make a real difference.

In the short time for which that family have been in Wales, they have found a place in the community. The removal of a family in such a way affects the whole community. Since that incident, the child's close friends have asked their mothers whether they will be taken away next. When the child is late coming to school, they have said, "Oh, he's gone again. He's been taken away again." It has shattered the confidence not only of the child involved but of the other children who are at school with him and those in the same street. We have a duty to make our children feel that they will be brought up in the safest, most caring way possible. That means all children, including those in the asylum and immigration system. The new welfare duty in the Bill must tackle that issue.

Mr. Gerrard: I am listening to what my hon. Friend is saying and I agree with all of it. Is she clear about whether the duty in the Bill, which will apply to UKBA staff, will also apply to the staff of any contractors that are performing services for the agency? I am sure that she knows that private contractors now get involved in important parts of the immigration system, including removals.

Julie Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. That is certainly an important point, and I hope that the Minister will clarify it in his response.

All children have a right to be treated equally, whoever they are. Children are children, and the children of asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers should be treated in the same way that we expect our own children to be treated. As things stand, I believe that they have been treated less favourably. I find it upsetting to think of children being snatched from their beds in dawn raids. I know of instances in which the mother was not allowed to explain to the child exactly what was happening.

The Children's Commissioner for England raised that issue recently in his "11 Million Children" briefing. He particularly drew attention to the loss of personal possessions, which is an important point. Someone who comes to this country as an asylum seeker, seeking refuge, may have brought very few things. When they are taken away early in the morning, there is sometimes not time for them to get those things. He told tales of children losing their treasured teddy bears. I find it very concerning that that has happened. I hope that the Minister can say that all those issues in relation to clause 57 will be addressed. I know that the code of practice has been in place, so I wonder why such things can still happen.

In Wales, the Welsh Refugee Council is the lead voluntary sector agency working with refugees and asylum seekers, in partnership with the Children in Wales group, which I chair here in Westminster. In their briefing to me on the Bill, both organisations raised concerns, including about children being held in detention centres at all. In their briefing, they quoted Marcia, the mother of Michael, aged nine, as saying:

> "After the detention Michael was in a bad way. The bedwetting was a problem again and he had nightmares. He wouldn't go upstairs without me...Michael was afraid of the police coming".

They expressed concerns about dawn raids, long journeys, children and parents sometimes being split up and children seeing their parents at their most distraught and suffering post-traumatic stress. There are therefore questions about how the code of conduct is working, and it is essential that the welfare clause does its bit.

We must consider the issue of children being in detention at all, which I do not believe should happen. As Anne Owers said in May 2008, which is not that long ago:

> "An immigration removal centre can never be a suitable place for a child and we were dismayed to find children being detained and some children spending large amounts of time incarcerated. We were concerned about ineffective and unaccountable months of detention in this extremely important area".

In the debate in the other place, it was mentioned that there are no reliable statistics about children being held in detention centres, and it was agreed that the Government would address that issue.

There are some concerns about the new welfare duty. An Opposition Member said that it was important that it should apply to UKBA staff who are placed abroad at entry clearance points and during escorted removals from the UK. The concern is that the inclusion of the words "in the UK" could leave some of the most vulnerable children who come into contact with such staff unprotected while they are outside the UK. That was debated in the other place, and I hope that it will be given more consideration here. I understand that Lord West said that it would be a matter of policy, not duty.

We need better statistics so that we know how many children and families are going into detention, and we should make a great effort to find effective alternatives, as we discussed earlier in the debate. There are other matters that I feel concerned about, most of which have had a good airing today, such as the destitution of many failed asylum seekers and the fact that many people cannot go back to their countries of origin because of long-standing conflicts in places such as Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea. I pay tribute to the campaign "Still Human Still Here", many of whose events I have attended in Cardiff. Many of the failed asylum seekers I have met there have an enormous amount to contribute to this country, and I have been distressed by what they have had to do to get a livelihood. There are women who become prostitutes to get money so that they can manage.

There are good things in the Bill, and I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Borders and Immigration, who is going to respond, is a fair Minister. I have found him very helpful when I have taken individual cases to him. However, we have to make a decisive change to how children and families are treated in the system.

7.9 pm

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): First, I apologise to the Home Secretary and to my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) for not being present for the initial speeches. It is not like me to be absent, but I have been dealing with a matter that is pertinent to the debate during the afternoon, as the Minister for Borders and Immigration will appreciate. There is a letter waiting for him when he returns to his office. However, I apologise for speaking so late.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan) because we find ourselves speaking about the same topic. The House may recall that the Yarl's Wood detention centre is in my constituency, and I have raised several issues about it over the years. I have had run-ins with the UK Border Agency, and I may well do so again in my remarks this evening. In my view, Yarl's Wood has worked well on behalf of detainees and it makes considerable efforts to ensure that children's time in detention is handled as well and as effectively as possible. The conditions in which the children are kept are good, as are the educational facilities—it is just sad that they are there. I share the hon. Lady's view—I wish that they were not. It is a difficult issue, as Conservative and Labour Front Benchers well know, but I do not believe that children should be detained. Perhaps the circumstances that I shall describe will emphasise that.

On Saturday, I went to see a family at Yarl's Wood. The family is Sudanese—a mother with three girls, aged 14, 10 and three. They have been in this country for a couple of years—coincidentally, they lived in Cardiff, though not in the hon. Lady's constituency. The father disappeared in Darfur and the family applied for asylum, but the application was turned down. A couple of months ago, the family were taken to Yarl's Wood. The three girls face the inevitable prospect of female genital mutilation when they return—the 14-year-old faces it almost immediately on her return. It is impossible to describe to the House the horror and apprehension that the family feel about their imminent return and the desperate situation of the 14-year-old girl. They are in deep despair.

[Alistair Burt]

I went to see the family because of the circumstances of their attempted removal last week, about which I have already written to the Minister. A further letter has gone to him today. I agree with the hon. Lady—I have always found the Minister, who is a long-standing friend, capable and humane. I hope that he will agree to my request to see him before removal directions are carried out.

I visited the family on Saturday with a member of Yarl's Wood Befrienders, to whom I pay tribute. The Befrienders are a group of ordinary men and women who, sometimes out of Christian conviction, sometimes out of sheer humanitarian concern, go and see the people who are detained in Yarl's Wood, not because they are taking part in their cases—that is left to lawyers, refugee groups, asylum groups and others—but because they want those detained, who are currently almost exclusively women and children, to have someone to talk to, who might care for them and understand what they are going through. We know that all sorts of cases end up in a detention centre—in some, it is appropriate that the people are returned. There will be cases of justice and injustice, but all who are there need a human touch at times, and the Befrienders do a wonderful job. On Saturday, I went with Heather to see the family whose case I am describing about their attempted removal.

I was contacted suddenly before their anticipated removal, and I asked whether the Minister would be good enough in the circumstances, bearing in mind the likely consequences of their return for the girls, to put the removal directions on hold and allow the family more time to see a new solicitor and present another case. On the afternoon in question, the family were taken from Yarl's Wood. They were in a van on their way to the airport when news came through from the Minister's office that he had been kind enough to grant a stay of removal directions. The information was immediately transmitted to the mother, who still had her mobile phone, and she told the escort service that the removal directions had been cancelled. Understandably, the escorts needed to confirm that and they did so shortly after they arrived at the airport.

However, instead of being immediately taken back to Yarl's Wood, the family was taken to another part of the airport, away from the main concourse, and then on to the tarmac. Their bags were loaded into the plane and it was made clear that the family would be put on the plane. The family members were separated from each other so that the children could be loaded on to the plane first. The mother became extremely distressed and was restrained in the elastic cuffs that are used. I am pleased to say that the children were not so restrained. The mother resisted, not unnaturally, and there was further to-ing and fro-ing. She was placed in the aircraft, where she continued to resist, and then the escort said that further confirmation had been received that the removal directions had been cancelled. That followed a further intervention on my part to the Minister's office, asking what on earth was going on when removal directions had been cancelled but, contrary to the Minister's express wishes, were being carried out.

The family was taken off the plane, put back in the van and returned to Yarl's Wood, where they were placed in a separate area to help them recover. I appreciate why Serco at Yarl's Wood did that—I am sure that it was right and proper. The next morning, before they were to return to the unit, they were served with a further notice of immediate removal, which was in breach of the 72-hour rule. They should not have been served with such directions until 72 hours had passed after the previous attempt to remove them. Again, I made a further intervention and again, the Minister's office understood that a mistake had been made and the order was countermanded. The family was then let be, and I went to see them a couple of days later.

I wrote to the Minister, saying that I would be grateful if he held an inquiry into the circumstances and ascertained why instructions had been countermanded and why the family had been put through the extraordinary distress and agony, which I cannot adequately convey to the House, of being told that their removal had been cancelled and then put on a plane, having the directions rescinded again, returning to Yarl's Wood and receiving a further removal direction. The hon. Lady spoke about clause 57, which deals with the welfare of children, and I am wondering where current provision for welfare is in such circumstances. I have asked the Minister whether he will be good enough to inquire into the circumstances.

I learned this afternoon that removal directions have been set again for the family for Friday. As far as I know, no inquiry has taken place into what happened the other week. No time has been given for the new solicitors to make proper representations about what is likely to happen to the girls when they return to the Sudan. I am deeply upset that a further intervention by me is required to ask the Minister to give proper time for an inquiry into what happened and the reasons for it.

I also ask the Minister to consider the case because I think that the family should be out of there. I do not mean that the case should be closed, but I do not believe that the family should be in Yarl's Wood. Families are detained at Yarl's Wood because the UK Border Agency has reason to believe that they might abscond. I am still puzzled about why families with children, especially young children, who need to be registered for health and education reasons, are perceived as likely to abscond. We all understand that that might apply to single people or even couples, but I have always been puzzled about why it would apply to children. The reason given is that families have refused directions previously and that makes them likely to abscond. I do not think that it does. I believe that it makes them likely to refuse directions in future, but not to abscond from their homes.

The family should go back to Cardiff. The 14-year-old was unable to take a public examination when she was due to take it. As the hon. Lady knows, that is often a consequence of the UK Border Agency's intervention and of taking children at the wrong time, such as sensitive times for their education. The young lady was allowed to take her exam in the confines of Yarl's Wood.

That is only one family's story. I do not pretend for a second to have the answers. I understand why some children are sometimes detained and why it is not possible for the Minister to say that we should never do so. I also understand the restriction on my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), but I am concerned.

I have been talking about just one family's story. I do not know whether we can have a policy in this country for no child ever to be returned to a place where she would face female genital mutilation, but I wish that we did. I do not see how we can make that work for everybody, but I am sure that the House can understand that anyone who had met a family in such circumstances, worked with them and seen their children would want to find some way of ensuring that what they feared did not happen. The situation is like the story of the woman on the beach who sees all the starfish lying on the shore. She walks down, picks one up and tosses it into the waves, but there are hundreds more on the shore, so her friend says to her, "What on earth are you doing? Look at all the starfish. You can't deal with them all," and she says, "No, I can't deal with them all. But I can deal with this one—I can toss this one back."

Sometimes that is all that we can do. We can see only the odd case that comes to our notice and try to do our best. When the Minister gets back to his office, will he kindly look at the letter that I have written, lift the removal directions for this week, give the case an opportunity to be looked at afresh and see whether there is not a better answer? In the meantime, while the case is being considered—it may take some time—could the family return to Cardiff, where they ought to be?

7.21 pm

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): I apologise to hon. Members for coming late to this debate. I have been in the Committee considering the Finance Bill all afternoon.

I want quickly to raise a straightforward point about a constituent of mine, William Watrin-Cattrall. He was born to a British father and a Dutch-Indonesian mother who were not married. As a result, young William, who has been pressing for some years to be a British citizen, is not allowed to be one. I ask the Minister please to revisit the amendment tabled in another place by Baroness Falkner that would allow those born to British fathers, but whose mothers are not British citizens and are not married to their fathers, to register as British citizens if their rights to do so derive from paternity.

The Secretary of State currently has some discretion in respect of those who fall foul of the legislation. The law changed in July 2006, but I am not clear in how many cases citizenship has been granted. I would welcome any figures from the Minister on just how many people have been given citizenship. However, I hope that the Government are willing to revisit the issue in the course of the Bill's passage through this House, as his colleague in the other place has suggested. My simple plea is therefore this: will the Minister please look at the issue for my constituent William Watrin-Cattrall?

7.22 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): This has been a fascinating debate and, particularly given the revelations of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), a moving and in some ways horrifying one. That causes some difficulties, in that I can either respond to the debate or address the Bill, which is what this debate is supposed to be about, because, to be honest, the two bear a slightly tangential relationship with each other. *[Interruption.]* As urged by the Minister from a sedentary position, I shall concentrate largely on the Bill, as that is what we are meant to be debating.

Let me first take this opportunity to say that I hope that the Home Secretary finds life more peaceful and less turbulent out of the front line. Let me also assure her, in her absence, that I for one will be reading at least one part of her memoirs with particular interest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) made a thoughtful contribution and was right about the necessity to debate immigration with the right tone. At times in this House and outside, that has not happened. It is incumbent on us all to give a lead in that respect.

The Bill illustrates that we have a Government who, after 12 years of struggling—and largely failing—in immigration policy, are now just punch drunk when trying to deal with it. The House sees a new immigration Bill every year, but far too many of them, including this one, ignore the real issues and instead add to the confusion of those caught up in our immigration system.

This was originally meant to be the year when we had the great reforming immigration Bill, replacing all legislation going back to the 1970s and simplifying it. Then Ministers published a draft Bill, with 13 parts and 214 clauses, which they said was part of the biggest shake-up of the immigration system for a decade. By the time we saw the Bill before us today, it had shrunk alarmingly, to four parts and 55 clauses. Being realistic, I should welcome that. Too much of the Government's legislation is usually damaging, so the less of it and the smaller their Bills are, the better. Despite that shrinkage, however, the Government have nevertheless still managed to include a fair amount of bad ideas in the Bill, which is why we welcome the improvements that were made to it in the other place.

However, if I understood the relevant parts of the Home Secretary's speech correctly, it is particularly regrettable that it is still the Government's intention to remove many of the improvements that were made in the other place. Presumably that is what we will spend some of our time in Committee debating. If so, I should tell the Minister now that we will oppose him in those endeavours. I hope that other parties will do the same, because in many cases where the Government suffered defeat on the Bill in another place, it was because of cross-party efforts. I hope that we will continue that in this House.

We have before us a rag-bag Bill that lacks any internal coherence, although some of it is useful. We have heard contributions from the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan) and my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire about clause 57 and the improvements in the treatment of children. We welcome that and, more importantly, we hope that it will lead to a genuine change in how children are treated in the immigration system. Some of the Bill is therefore useful, but some of it is irrelevant and other parts are actively damaging.

Let me go through the various parts of the Bill. Part 1 deals with functions at the border. The Government are clearly trying to reduce duplication of functions. We think that that is a useful step, but we think even more strongly that the Bill is a missed opportunity. The Government's failure to tackle Britain's porous borders has resulted in a disastrous rise in organised immigration crime. We cannot tackle crime in the UK effectively without addressing the problem of our porous borders. We believe that our borders can be better policed,

[Damian Green]

preventing significant illegal immigration, as well as cracking down on the trafficking of people, weapons and drugs. That is why, as my hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary explained, an incoming Conservative Government would make the setting up of a national border police force one of our top priorities. The Bill could, if the Government were to co-operate, allow us to make a start on that.

Experience has surely taught us in all parts of the House that the specialisation of police services is effective in fighting new types of crime. That is why we set up a committee under Lord Stevens, a former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who conducted a review of our border security arrangements and concluded that only a unified border force could protect our borders effectively. We intend to replace the current system, which lacks a fully comprehensive and joined-up strategy as well as adequate direction. The officers of the border force should have all the necessary powers and training to arrest, detain and prosecute offenders, as well as the ability to develop specialist skills in fighting people trafficking, illegal immigration and drug smuggling. Although part 1 has some useful features, it is a huge missed opportunity.

Part 2 concerns citizenship and naturalisation. I originally thought that the problem with this part of the Bill was that it was slightly irrelevant to the real and very complex issues affecting community cohesion and national identity. I freely agree that those issues are crucial, difficult and hugely complex. My original worry about the Bill was that it sent out a clear message that even if someone is here, working hard and contributing to society, the Government want to make it more difficult for them to stay here and become British. That seems to be the message behind the Bill, and I am genuinely not sure that it is one that the Minister really wants to send out. It might suit some short-term, dog-whistle politics, but it is certainly not the most thoughtful long-term strategy.

The problem is that the Home Secretary complicated matters even more in her speech this afternoon, which I found completely extraordinary—*[Interruption.]* If the Whip would like to contribute to the debate, he is more than welcome to do so—*[Interruption.]* Okay. Well, if he is telling the Minister what to say, I feel for the Minister.

Let me return to what the Home Secretary said earlier, because it was extraordinary in two ways. First, she said that she was proposing a new points-based system for citizenship, along with the points-based system for general immigration that the Government have introduced. It seems extraordinary—especially at a time when this place finds itself in more ill repute than it has done for a long time—when we are discussing a Bill that partly deals with citizenship, that the Minister responsible for the Bill should announce that a whole new citizenship policy is coming down the line and that she is proposing to introduce it for consultation within the next eight weeks. There is not a word about this new policy in the Bill that the House of Commons is discussing today and that the House of Lords has already spent weeks discussing. What kind of way to treat Parliament is that? The Home Office is quietly working away at a whole new policy relating specifically to a policy area in the Bill, yet it has not thought to share it with any of the parliamentarians who are debating the Bill. I think that Ministers should consider their behaviour very seriously.

Even more extraordinary was the fact that, at one stage in what was not—let me be charitable—the most coherent explanation of a policy that I have ever heard, the Home Secretary said that she would cap the number of people granted citizenship each year. So she is proposing to introduce not only a new set of hurdles in the form of a new points-based system, but, on top of that, a cap. Like everyone else, I appreciate the irony that that sounds very similar to our proposals on general immigration, which she has always criticised and dismissed. She now appears to have adopted them wholesale in relation to citizenship.

It seems very peculiar that a proposal as radical as this could be introduced in the middle of our deliberations on the Bill. It is not even as though we were promised the Bill in the next Session of Parliament. We have been promised another immigration Bill in the next Session, but it is supposed to be for simplification purposes. A radical change to the citizenship arrangements in this country is being introduced between two immigration Bills that the House is supposed to be debating, which is the most extraordinary way to proceed.

But let us discuss the Bill before us. Two areas give rise to particular concern. One, which has been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House, is the offer of a quicker route to citizenship if voluntary activity is undertaken. That comes very close to compulsory volunteering, which is perhaps the ultimate absurdity. I share the fears of the Home Affairs Committee, which has produced a thoughtful report on the Bill:

> "There is a danger that the activity condition, if implemented without proper consideration, could cause a glut of poorly regulated 'volunteers'. This could place undue and unwanted pressure on the voluntary sector".

That is a genuine fear, and I hope that Ministers will listen to it. I hope that they will also listen to Volunteering England, which has asked a number of questions, the most pertinent of which is:

> "How will the Minister encourage organisations that feel that they do not have capacity to take more volunteers to open up new opportunities and spend time on the verification arrangements for the active citizenship scheme?"

We are in the throes of setting up yet more unnecessary new bureaucracy that will make life difficult, particularly for the small organisations in the volunteering field that often do very good and important work.

The other unsatisfactory aspect of this part of the Bill—it has been much improved by their lordships—was the retrospective section relating to highly skilled migrants who are already here. That group has already won significant victories in the courts against the Government, and it would be sensible for Ministers to stop fighting a battle that they keep losing. In the Lords, my noble Friend Baroness Hanham succeeded in introducing an amendment, which now stands as clause 39. It ensures that people in the closing stages of their limited leave to remain do not get caught up by the new arrangements. That is only fair. Indeed, on 6 April, Mrs. Justice Cox found that there was

> "a substantive legitimate expectation that the terms on which you joined the Highly Skilled Migrants programme would be the terms on which you qualified for settlement."

That is as clear-cut as it is possible to be, and I hope that the Government will now stop flogging this very dead horse.

It is also worth considering the Government's desire to abolish the common travel area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland, as well as the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Dr. McDonnell) is rightly concerned about that. The Government claim not to be doing this, but their assertion simply does not stand up to examination. There will be immigration controls on air and sea journeys where none exists at present. There will no longer be a common travel area.

Will the Minister tell us what effect these new controls will have on staffing arrangements at the UKBA? New border controls will mean either a significant shift of resources from existing posts or the need for many more immigration officers. Which of these is going to happen? To make matters worse, the measures will not lead to an increase in security for the UK. There are, rightly, no proposals to change the arrangements along the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, so the effect will be to inconvenience travellers for no discernible purpose whatever. If Ministers argue that citizens in England, Scotland and Wales will be better protected by these measures, why are they discriminating against British citizens who live in Northern Ireland? The current arrangements work well and do not require changing. The removal of the Government's proposed change received widespread cross-party support in the Lords, and I urge Ministers not to seek to change the provision back.

We will also be interested to hear Ministers' arguments about the change to the court arrangements proposed and rejected by their lordships. I think that we all want to achieve a system of immigration and asylum justice that is considerably faster than the current system, but that does not achieve speed purely at the expense of those who may have a legitimate claim to appeal. It was obvious that Ministers in the Lords could not convince their House of the merits of the Government's proposals, and I shall be interested to hear the Minister argue the case in this House.

We shall obviously be raising a range of other issues in Committee. From whatever angle we look at this Bill—the eighth immigration Bill produced by the Government in their period of office—it fails to deal with the central problems produced by the long-term failure of immigration policy. It fiddles around the edges of a number of big issues, but it does not make our borders more secure or provide clear incentives for those in this country to integrate fully and properly, and it is not fair to many of those who have come here to work and to contribute to our economy.

There is a need for big changes in our immigration system. We need changes to the points-based system to allow us to place a limit on the number of work permits issued, to bring about a properly integrated border police force and to strengthen the need to speak English for those intending to settle in this country, particularly through marriage.

The Bill fails to address these important central issues. It will go the way of many of its predecessors—over-hyped on its introduction, then barely leaving a trace on the real world. We need properly radical immigration legislation, but to get that, we need a new Government. With every day that passes, it becomes increasingly clear just how much we need a new Government.

7.39 pm

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): I thank hon. Members across the House for their contributions to the debate, which have revealed a great deal of experience. I should like to address my remarks first to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck) and the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who have raised serious points. Of course I agree to undertake to look into them, and to meet the hon. Gentleman. I believe that a letter on that matter may have crossed, as well.

In all cases, the policy that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has instructed me to adopt, which I am more than happy to do, is to place great weight on the representations of Members of Parliament because the MP is the person to whom someone seeking redress should go. That is why we take those representations very seriously, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mr. Malik) backs me up on that point. That is also why in all these instances we advise people that if they have a problem, they should to go to their MP. The Immigration Act 1971 gives the Secretary of State powers that are mainly delegated to me, and I take that responsibility extremely seriously. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire for his kind comments and I undertake to look further into the issue he raised.

A number of specific comments have been made and I shall try to answer them in the short time I have available—*[Interruption.]*—and I also want to deal with the bigger picture. Yes, I can assure the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and the House that I do not intend to speak until 10 o'clock. If I did, I suspect it would be last time I would ever speak from this Dispatch Box—and some might well think that that would be a good thing, anyway. *[Interruption.]* Pause for objections, please, *Hansard*.

This is a small Bill, and I believe that it has been unfairly criticised for not doing the whole job when it is, in fact, part of the jigsaw puzzle of the changes to the immigration system that we are introducing. It does essentially two things, both of which I believe have secured a consensus in this House and in the other place.

First, the Bill brings together the necessary statutory changes to ensure that the UK Border Agency is put on a proper legal footing—that involves the merger of its customs functions with its immigration functions from the previous Border and Immigration Agency and Customs and Excise, or the relevant parts of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. The creation of that single force meets the exact requirement that the House wants the Government to meet. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary mentioned in her opening remarks, when she first assumed that office, she intended not just to get rid of duplication, but to provide a more focused border security force.

In itself, of course, the border security force is only part of the chain. The 42 police forces—or 43 if we include the transport police—are now backed up by the Serious Organised Crime Agency, which operates overseas in co-operation with our border posts, providing the

[Mr. Phil Woolas]

joined-up police powers that Lord Stevens looked at in his report. The incorporation of the police force into the new UK Border Agency has taken place without diminishing the role of the other security organisations, which was the fear I had about it. I believe that the partnership is very important.

Keith Vaz *rose—*

Mr. Woolas: I give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs.

Keith Vaz: I am grateful. We must not forget the importance of Europol, which, under its new dynamic British director, is fully supported by the Home Secretary. The director is, as I say, British and Europol works with other police forces throughout the EU in order to combat illegal immigration.

Mr. Woolas: As ever, the expertise of the Select Committee Chairman helps me out. He makes a valid point, and I would add to it Frontex, the European frontier force. Frankly, this country could not protect itself against some of the criminal gangs coming from northern Africa and elsewhere without such co-operation. That raises an interesting point that I would like to put to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) and ask him to think about deeply as I know that he can. We depend on co-operation with other countries—primarily in Europe, but also elsewhere. In order to get that co-operation, we must share policies and information. One cannot take an exclusively nationalistic view; we cannot expect to collect data on people travelling to our country unless we are prepared to share data with other countries. That is a matter of common sense in practical policy information.

The first part of the Bill thus achieves what I have set out and the second part looks at the idea of earned citizenship. Again, I believe that some of the criticism of that idea has been unfair.

At the moment, this country provides for citizenship through naturalisation, for temporary leave to remain and in the middle we have the concept of indefinite leave to remain. Many of the people in my constituency and in others who have indefinite leave to remain are neither citizens nor temporary migrants; they are in what one might describe as no man's land. What we have done in this country has, in my view, failed to provide the routes for integration required to give expression to the aspiration of migrants to integrate into our communities and to get on with their lives. The big mistake in our debate is the false assumption that the migrant does not wish to move to integrate and to aspire. That is precisely why the idea of earned citizenship is not punitive, but a platform to help meet those aspirations.

Mr. Gerrard: Will the Minister acknowledge that some people are perfectly happy to remain with the status of indefinite leave to remain? They want to live here, but they do not necessarily wish to become citizens. Some countries allow dual nationality and others do not, so some people who might face having to give up their original nationality in order to become British citizens might actually prefer to remain with the status of indefinite leave.

Mr. Woolas: Of course I understand that point, but a person on ILR does not get dual citizenship and cannot get a visa on a British passport because they are not British citizens. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ashford looks confused; he has obviously never had an advice surgery with anybody with ILR status. In commenting on excellent and well-informed contributions, I have reassured the House that these proposals do not in any way retrospectively affect those with ILR. The hon. Member for Ashford fairly raised a point relating to the highly skilled migrants scheme; I concede that point, the court has ruled, and we will of course obey.

Damian Green: I am very glad to hear that last point and I look forward to the Home Secretary—or her successor—following the same route in respect of the ruling about DNA. Let me explain the apparent confusion. About 40 per cent. of people with ILR never apply for citizenship, so we are not talking about just a few people around the edges of the system, but about very significant numbers. The Minister appears to be advancing a new doctrine that those people are in some way a failure of the system and that he wants everyone on ILR to move towards citizenship. If I am looking confused, it is because I cannot really believe that he is saying that.

Mr. Woolas: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that I am not familiar with those with indefinite leave to remain, I invite him to come to Oldham this weekend. Of course it is the case that many people on ILR have chosen not to go for citizenship, but I ask the House—and the Committee if the House gives leave for the Bill to move on—to consider the reasons for that. The main point is that the proposals for earned citizenship should not be seen as punitive on the prospective citizen, but as a route to help those people to integrate into our society. That is why it is possible to provide the reassurance that the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker)—I agree with his analysis—quite rightly asked for. This means reassuring our indigenous population that that immigrant positively wants to be a member of our community so that we can have better cohesion and better relations in all our communities.

Let me deal with some specifics. The two parts of the Bill I have covered so far are quite simple. As the hon. Member for Ashford fairly said, it is a short Bill, so it does not provide the complete picture. It is not a simplification Bill. We have made announcements on that. It is rather unfair to say that we have put further efforts to one side, we have announced that we will move forward. I am grateful to the Select Committee for the scrutiny it has carried out so far. As the House knows, we intend to come back with further proposals.

Keith Vaz: I wonder whether my hon. Friend remembers my speech. In fact, I lamented the fact that we did not have the detail from the Minister, which was why we could not scrutinise the Bill. We hope that he will be able to allow that scrutiny in Committee, but—I am following his arguments very carefully—will he now address the point that was made about the backlog at the Border and Immigration Agency? Every Member present is concerned about the fact that another Bill is being passed and we are still receiving the letters from Lin Homer telling us that we must wait for two years to get a result.

Mr. Woolas: The Chairman of the Select Committee never misses an opportunity to raise this issue. Let me point out that we use the words "up to two years", which is not the same as "two years". Let me also point out that the figures that we have given, and continue to give, to his Committee show that we are managing the legacy, that it is being reduced, and that we are dealing with decisions more quickly. Moreover, following his Committee's representations, we have made policy changes to respond to the needs of Members of Parliament across the House, and the pilot that was conducted on an all-party basis has been implemented. So he is making progress, but he is asking a bit too much. In fact, he is asking two questions.

Let me now deal with the issue of compulsory volunteering. We reject the accusation that the volunteering is compulsory. What we are trying to do—with, I hope, the support across the House that we have received so far—is provide a route enabling people to show their commitment to citizenship by engaging in certain voluntary activities. The discussion of what those activities will be is for the Committee; we have made our own views known.

Let me make clear that we do not propose the abolition of the common travel area, which was mentioned by a number of Members including the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Dr. McDonnell). Along with the Government of Ireland, we are considering how we can improve the situation. According to our assessment, an increased security risk is posed by third-country nationals using the route. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) expressed anxiety about the potential impact on the ferries at Holyhead, and of course we must act in a way that is sensitive to that. However, I think that when we discuss the detail, the House will benefit from reassurances similar to those provided by my noble Friend Lord West of Spithead in his winding-up speech in the other place.

Let me deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). An interesting dialogue is taking place with the devolved Administrations on how we can fine-tune migration policy. As I think is recognised by the Scottish Government and others, the quintessential point is that if an immigrant may come to a certain part of the United Kingdom, we must have policies that encourage him or her to stay there, but there is a danger that if the pull of south-east England, north-west England or wherever were great, a Scottish route might be used to usurp it. We must have a grown-up dialogue with our Scottish colleagues about how to deal with that. I believe that the Migration Advisory Committee has made progress.

The policy instrument that is beneficial to the hon. Gentleman's argument is the separation of temporary migration for economic purposes from permanent settlement. I think that if someone comes to the country to work in, say, a skills-shortage area for a definite period, it will be possible to have our cake and eat it. However, we should bear in mind the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and others about that separation of temporary migration from permanent settlement.

Some Members referred to the detention of children. The hon. Member for North-East Bedfordshire cited a specific case, but also made a general point. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Julie Morgan) has raised the issue with me and with others, and has spoken about it in the House on many occasions. Government policy is, of course, that alternatives to detention to children are preferable, and a number of pilots have been conducted. I respect the point that was made by the hon. Member for Ashford, wearing his constituency hat. I was interested by what he said, and will bear it in mind. Dungavel in Scotland is one example of the possible alternatives.

The independent tribunals and courts, not Ministers, make decisions on eligibility and grants. It is the independent system that makes the decisions. I can reassure the House that I personally review each and every case of a child in detention. Each case comes up through the system and on to my desk, and I take that responsibility very seriously. However, the parent also has a responsibility to ensure that the child is not being used in the system. As was made clear by the example given by the hon. Member for Ashford, the perception is often as bad as the reality, and is sometimes worse. However, we cannot set policy precedent on the basis of an individual case. The Bill proposes to give us an even greater duty for the care of children than we already have. I think the House has welcomed that, and I am grateful for its support. I hope that the Committee will give more thought to the matter.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South mentioned the police and ombudsman powers. We will, of course, consider his points and respond to them in Committee.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard) has followed the debate very closely, and that he has concerns about the citizenship proposals. I want to try to convince him, and others who share his view, that the idea of earned citizenship is—as I have already said—beneficial not just to the immigrant but to the wider community. I also think it obvious that making change may have unintended consequences. My hon. Friend has alerted the House to some of them, and the hon. Member for Eastleigh alerted us to potential unintended consequences in the area of volunteering. The House must consider that, but I urge it not to reject proposals for change that will improve the overall position because of concerns about unintended consequences, real though they may be. I believe that, between us, we can solve those problems.

The hon. Member for Eastleigh made a genuinely powerful case for the benefit of migrancy to this country. He gave us figures based on experience, and pointed out that this is a country of transition for many hundreds of millions of people. Last year, 285 million came in and out of it. Our border controls, only part of which are dealt with in the Bill through UK Border Agency powers, are backed up by the new regimes on fingerprinting visas—the biometric identity which is proven to be working—electronic borders and the reintroduction of border controls. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's criticism of the past abolition of those controls.

The ability to analyse visa overstayers is critical. Without that and without the enforcement powers that the Bill partly gives us, the visa regime is worthless. That is why it must be seen as part of a wider strategy which includes the points-based system and, crucially, the sponsorship role of universities, colleges, employers and, indeed, individuals. The criticisms of the bogus colleges are, I believe, addressed by the introduction of the new scheme, but we have not hidden from the failures of the past under this and earlier Governments.

Chris Huhne: Will the Minister concede that while the e-Border scheme is crucial to ensuring that there are no visa overstayers, it is entirely unnecessary to proceed to collect all the other information about our citizens' travel plans as part of ensuring that our immigration control works? It simply is not.

Mr. Woolas: I have already urged the hon. Gentleman to think this through. First, we cannot operate in isolation from other countries. We cannot say to the Americans, "We want all your information, but we will not give you any of ours"; it does not work like that. Secondly, if one is keeping a register of people entering and leaving the country, one has to count the British people who are leaving as well, in order to identify where there may be false or fraudulent use of documents, for example, or dual citizenship, or a plethora of other such eventualities. In addition, there are the benefits in terms of crime and security; that point has already been made. Already, 2,900 people have been arrested as a result of e-Borders, many of them for serious crimes including murder and rape, simply because we have that counting in and counting out system.

Chris Grayling: May I press the Minister on the point about other countries? First, any other country is free to decide what to do—or what not to do—in terms of tracking people coming across its own borders. Secondly, and more importantly, is he actually suggesting that data about the movement of British citizens into and out of the United Kingdom will be shared with the Americans?

Mr. Woolas: Through ignorance rather than deliberately I suspect, the hon. Gentleman is confusing the two issues of the passenger transport data and the e-Borders system. I invite him—I make this invitation public—to come to the control centre at Heathrow and see for himself the benefits of that system. I am not a betting man, but my bet would be that when he has seen it—*[Interruption.]* I bet I would win it. My bet is that when he has seen it, he will drop his opportunistic opposition to it, which is based on his wrong belief that this is somehow an infringement of people's civil liberties.

The point about co-operation is extremely serious. We cannot say to the Americans and others that we will not give them our passenger data when we expect to know who is coming from their country to ours. That does not take into account the way the crime gangs work.

Chris Huhne *rose—*

Mr. Woolas: I shall give way again, but I have been urged to conclude by everybody in the House, so I shall then do so.

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Many Members will be reassured if we can have some more clarity on this issue, however. Under the e-Borders scheme, the Minister is proposing that the travel plans of ordinary British citizens going to and from this country will be stored on a database. Will that be made available to the Americans, or not?

Mr. Woolas: Those data will not. They are already collated—they have been for some time. If the hon. Gentleman reads the briefings that are available, he will come to understand the difference between the passenger data and the e-Borders system. I open the invitation to him to come and look at that.

I believe I have answered every specific question, and also the general points.

Jeremy Corbyn *rose—*

Mr. Woolas: If I have not answered my hon. Friend's point, I shall try to do so now.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Minister for giving way. He will have heard my interventions on the issue of the Chagos islanders and the anomaly in the 2002 law, which is specific to a smallish number of people. The matter was discussed in the Lords. Is he prepared to accept an appropriate amendment in Committee to try to resolve this anomaly and give these people what Parliament wished them to have in the initial legislation?

Mr. Woolas: At the moment, the policy of the Government is not to do so. I believe the Committee will wish to look at that issue, and, as my hon. Friend rightly says, there is also the debate from the other place, which I have studied.

Chris Huhne: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Woolas: No; I said that I would not give way again. I believe I have answered all the questions that have been asked.

I believe that this short Bill is a fair Bill. I also believe that there is consensus on it. The debates on it have raised some specific points that I hope we can iron out in Committee if the Bill is passed this evening, and I certainly intend to build on the consensus on it. In answer to the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), it is certainly the case that, based on the good work he has done in scrutinising and simplifying the Bill—which ran to, I think, 350 clauses—we will come back and provide the final piece of the jigsaw in terms of the border controls that this country wants. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

BORDERS, CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION BILL [*LORDS*] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill [*Lords*]:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 18 June 2009.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—*(Mr. Ian Austin.)*

Question agreed to.

BORDERS, CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION BILL [*LORDS*] (MONEY)

Queen's Recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or a government department, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided, and

(2) payments out of the Consolidated Fund to enable the Commissioners for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Secretary of State or the Director of Border Revenue to make disbursements.—*(Mr. Ian Austin.)*

Question agreed to.

BORDERS, CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION BILL [*LORDS*] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging of fees in connection with nationality applications, claims, services, processes, advice and information; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*(Mr. Ian Austin.)*

Question agreed to.

Family Benefits (Absent Teenage Fathers)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Ian Austin.)*

8.6 pm

Mr. Graham Allen (Nottingham, North) (Lab): My constituency has the highest teenage pregnancy rates in western Europe, and we in Nottingham are doing things to address that—for instance, by having created the teenage pregnancy taskforce, which I have the privilege of chairing.

All too often, there is an unspoken assumption that girls alone should take responsibility for avoiding unwanted pregnancy and for caring for the baby if they fail. A recent Bristol university study shows that when both the parents of a new baby are under 17, only 2 per cent. of fathers are still involved with the baby nine months after the birth. Recent research by Dr. Peter Gates suggested that most teenage mothers in Nottingham were raising their child on their own, and that relationships between teenage parents were generally unstable. This is a tragedy.

The evidence suggests that love, nurture and support from an involved young father in the brain-building early years of nought to five gives a baby much better life chances. Yet teenage fathers are themselves children. That is the central dilemma for social policy generally and the benefits system in particular. That dilemma is complicated by the dispersal of responsibilities and powers between Government Departments and agencies, especially the divide between the Department for Work and Pensions, dealing with benefits and enforcement, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families, dealing with wider policy. Perhaps even the Department for Culture, Media and Sport could think through how it could tackle the drip-feed of laddish TV and testosterone-filled films, and help promote a more respectful culture of manhood and fatherhood to give role models for young males in our society.

We need to ensure that the complex system of policy, payments and penalties gives clear encouragement to teen fathers to do the best they can for their children, not only financially but emotionally. The new Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission has the opportunity to make this agenda its own. I have had the good fortune to speak to a number of its senior people, and it is clear that it does not want to be just an enforcement agency focusing on recalcitrant fathers. Those people want to go further; they see a policy role in trying to pre-empt the problems before they begin.

Let me now take a look at the current benefits system—and compliment the Minister on the work she has done in this area during her spell at the DWP. Contrary to the stereotype, many young fathers want to be involved with their children, but some are held back by confusion or anxiety about the benefits system and its financial implications. Does the Minister think that it is true that teen parents can get more benefit separately than together, thus discouraging the creation and continuation of family units? I would like to know whether that popular perception is true. If it is not true, we need to get that message into the areas that I, like a number of colleagues in the Chamber tonight, represent.

Many young fathers also complain that the benefits system is complicated and financially burdensome. The new Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission

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now encourages parents to agree child maintenance arrangements directly with each other. That sounds good for people of good education—it is a sensible way to proceed, and many middle class people would use it to make good arrangements—but it is not necessarily that easy for poorer and less articulate parents, especially in areas where personal intimidation is often a way of resolving personal issues. I hope that the Minister will tell me, perhaps in writing, about the Government's plans to help that group of people—those on a lower socio-economic scale—to make the maintenance arrangements and to make them stick.

We also need to find a place for young fathers who have no chance of making payments. Our system does not yet provide the social and emotional basis for such fathers to make informed decisions, nor does it give them a set of clear incentives to stay involved with their children, even when they desperately want to. This is not just about the crudities of the benefits system; it is about the subtleties of ensuring that the right perception and opportunity exist for young teenage fathers, who often want to make a go of a relationship and raise a child in the right way.

The Government have made fantastic progress in recent times, and I am particularly delighted that they intend to allow, in the very near future, all young mothers to keep any financial maintenance from their child's father without losing any benefits. That is a long overdue, welcome and important step forward, on which I congratulate the Minister. It will deny absentee fathers the excuse, which many use, to refuse a contribution because, as they put it, "The social will only take it away." Apart from relieving family poverty, the change will also provide an opportunity for fathers to make a real difference if they wish to. Will the Minister let us know, either now or in writing to me, what research is being done by the new CMEC on how best to encourage non-resident parents, who are overwhelmingly fathers, to pay maintenance in those new circumstances? The Government have created an opportunity, and I hope that it will be seized upon.

We also need to keep the benefits system as simple as possible. Young low-income parents have to negotiate a labyrinth of websites and leaflets. Will the Minister examine the possibility of a pilot for a one-stop office for young fathers, which could offer advice and support, as well as a medium through which to make maintenance payments? We could try that in one or two areas. Very often the parents of young mothers and fathers encourage absenteeism by the father. The perception that it is always the girl in the relationship who is the wronged party may not always be true; it may well be that the teenage boy would like to play a more significant part but is driven away by the mother herself, or by relatives and the hostility that the young person encounters. By refusing access and by blatant hostility, threats and infighting, such people can deny young fathers the chance to win the trust and respect not only of the family but of the child itself.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the downsides of the separation of the payment through the Child Support Agency from the legal process is that there is always frustration when someone is making a contribution, but that does not mean that they get any more rights of access to their children? It is unfair if somebody has made an attempt to pay to bring up their child, yet is just as likely not to see their child as someone who has flagrantly disregarded the need to make a contribution.

Mr. Allen: I shall touch briefly on contact later, but my hon. Friend's remarks underline the need to bring the Ministry of Justice and other Departments to the party and ensure that we are not working in silos. All the parts have to work together, and as I know how difficult that can be at the local level, I can only imagine how difficult that might be in Whitehall, if the Minister were to set herself that task. There would be some tremendous dividends if we were to go along the lines that he suggests.

I wish to finish my remarks about the one-stop shop by saying that that could be a way in which young fathers could develop the self-esteem to build relationships and to have a meaningful dialogue with their child's hostile grandparents.

There is another wrinkle in the benefits system for many fathers. They claim that maintenance payments are too high, and that failure to keep up with them leads to the breakdown of relationships with their children. Obviously, that problem is more acute for young fathers with a very low earning capacity. Full-time work may not be an option, especially if they are still in education. Through peer mentoring by other, successful young fathers, and through having vocational training, young fathers could be prepared for the world of work and for their parental responsibilities in a much better way.

The Care to Learn scheme, which pays up to £160 per child per week for teens' child care and travel, is welcome. That and similar programmes could also give young fathers on benefits the chance to learn a skill and the chance to move forward and get a steady income coming into their house. Let us suppose that by taking part in such programmes young fathers secured a weekly addition of £5 or £10 to the mother's benefit, without affecting her other entitlements. What a change that might be able to bring about: it would give young fathers not only skill and experience, but self-worth and the chance to demonstrate their sense of responsibility to their child.

Alternatively, a community programme pilot could provide waged positions with training and support and an automatic contribution to the mother as a maintenance payment. I hope very much that the CMEC will be allowed to let its imagination run into policy areas and to provide some of these new ideas that will begin to unite some of the families that we are talking about, and that that will allow those young children to have a mother and father in the same household. What more does the Minister feel can be done to incentivise young fathers to combine education with part-time work and maintaining the fullest possible involvement with their children?

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) touched on the difficult and sensitive topic of maintenance and contact between parents and children. The former is administered by CMEC, the latter by the courts. In the light of his remarks, will the Minister consider working across departmental boundaries and try—again, in a couple of areas—to bring maintenance, contact and all other child-related issues together under the

same roof, as happens in Australia's family centres? That might be one way of making progress in this country. Let us try it in a couple of areas that want to initiate it and see whether it works with organisations that are attempting to find some answers to these problems.

I now wish to deal with the myths. I hope that the Minister will take on the role—here is another burden for her—of myth-buster general in this area. She knows very well that although we can change things centrally, word of mouth locally can take a long while to catch up, and myths still persist. For example, let us consider the prevalent myth that benefits and offers of housing give incentives for young women to become lone parents. A study by the Minister's Department this year concluded that there was no consistent evidence for that, but when I talk to single mums on the estates in my constituency—I am sure that other Members do the same in their constituencies—I find that the perception is very different. If we could have provision in supported housing with fewer limitations than at present—there is no space for couples with children—it would send a clear message to fathers in those areas with a concentration of teen pregnancies that they would be welcome. It could break down the matriarchal culture on some of our estates, where there is no adult male in the household, just grandmother, mother and young child. Housing is the responsibility of the Department for Communities and Local Government, which needs to be brought in on this matter because Whitehall needs to mesh on these issues.

I have also suggested to the Minister the need for a simple myth-busting series of posters to be spread throughout our poorer communities to underline the recent positive changes in the benefit regime and to kill off some of the more pernicious myths that stop people making progress.

Tackling teenage pregnancies and absentee fathers requires not only helping young parents to provide effective parenting, but also nurturing and supporting young people before pregnancy occurs, and encouraging them to make good life choices. Nottingham's early intervention package therefore begins with the babies who will be tomorrow's parents. We use the family-nurse partnership not only to give intensive help to new teen mothers through health visitors, but to instil the essential capabilities in infants that will enable them to become better parents later in life.

Nottingham's Sure Start and children's centres then pick up the baton and they aim to make children strong and resilient, through activities that encourage them to make their own decisions. That prepares them for making the really tough decisions later on—including those about sex and parenthood.

We then teach all primary school boys, as well as girls, the SEAL—or social and emotional aspects of learning—programme. This gives every child the intellectual equipment to develop effectively, which sadly all too many do not get at home because of the lack of parenting skills in their domestic situation. To complete the circle, in September we are taking this process to the next stage by starting to teach 11 to 16-year-olds life skills in every secondary school in Nottingham that volunteers for the programme—anticipating the Government's initiative to make personal, health and social education, or PHSE, compulsory in two years' time. This will enable boys as well as girls to understand how to parent, to sustain relationships and to build and maintain families. We are happy to teach young people mathematics, English and a foreign language, but somehow we resile from teaching them how to be decent people and good parents to the next generation of young people to the highest possible standards.

Mr. Drew: In the early 1990s I took part in a review of this issue, and the one factor that we found to be symptomatic of teenage pregnancy was lack of self-esteem in both boys and girls. It is possible to foster self-esteem through education, and does my hon. Friend agree that we should build that aim into all our policies?

Mr. Allen: We sum it up in Nottingham in slightly different words, but to exactly the same effect—we talk about building the social and emotional bedrock for young people. If young people have the ability to interact, to learn and to resolve arguments without violence—the basic things that most middle-class parents teach their children—it is virtually impossible to fail in terms of educational attainment, aspiration to work and raising a decent family. That is why it is important that such things are built into provision from the earliest point, instead of chasing after the problem later, by which time it is all but intractable without the expenditure of massive amounts of money and person hours.

In addition to building young people's social and emotional bedrock, in Nottingham we are working directly to address young potential fathers. We fund a specialist health development worker for young men and have commissioned research by Dr. Peter Gates at Nottingham university on how best to identify potential absentee fathers and communicate with them. That research builds on the work that we have done with young girls, and it will result in a hard-hitting DVD and appropriate sex education materials to accompany it.

I know that the Minister will agree that more needs to be done nationally to target teenage boys, through the benefits system, and in enabling them to make mature decisions about parenthood, and encouraging them to delay sexual activity. Nottingham could be an example of how to tackle the problem in both the immediate and the long term. It is not only about swatting the mosquito, but draining the swamp. We need to build for the future through a long-term programme of investment.

Any materials used need to be easy to follow, and not beyond the comprehension of teen parents who left school early—or even of the average MP. The Family Planning Association does good work in this sphere, with community projects targeted at young men. It made getting the message across to boys the theme for its annual contraception week last year.

The message may be getting through: according to NHS statistics, the number of men attending NHS contraception clinics leapt by 20 per cent. in 2006-07, and there was a huge 54 per cent. increase in those aged 15 and 16. These signs of improvement must be enhanced by further work to provide young men with the social and emotional basis for sensible decision making.

I was pleased to see that in February the Ministers with responsibility for public health and for young people announced an extra £20.5 million to support young people and help them to access contraception. Do the Government actually know what that money has been spent on? Do the Government know the extent to which it is being used to track real boys as well as real

[Mr. Allen]

girls? Otherwise, it could be business-as-usual syndrome instead of a sharp, systematic identification and face-to-face contact with those who need it before they even consider sexual activity. In other words, we should have outcomes with specific people rather than just allocating more money.

That is not as daunting as it might sound. Even in Nottingham, only 417 teenagers had babies last year. That is a perfectly manageable number when it comes to getting to know those people, their siblings and their associates as part of defining a broader at-risk group with whom we can then work very directly with some serious pre-emptive education. We will not do that unless we identify where money is going and what it is being spent on and get some real outcomes noted and reported to the centre so that they can be properly tracked.

Although improvements to the benefit system are an important step and the focus of tonight's debate, it must be remembered that under-16s or under-18s who are full-time students or who are getting income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance do not pay maintenance under the current rules. We need to find other ways to reach those fathers and to ensure that they are involved in their children's lives.

I welcome another initiative of the Government's, which is the requirement in the Welfare Reform Bill that a father's name be recorded on the birth certificate. That might seem obvious to many people who read or listen to this debate, but it is not a current requirement. Four in 10 babies registered without a father are born to teenage mothers. This welcome change will not only make it easier to track down who owes maintenance, for example, but it will also enable the transmission of messages to the father to highlight the importance of that father's being in the child's life as that young person grows up.

Let us not forget that two out of three teen fathers are resident at a different address from the mother. Rebuilding that family unit with every possible assistance and support is clearly something that would be beneficial to the child when they were growing up. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister could tell us whether that provision will also entail a corresponding requirement to inform the father that he is named. That would not only be a safeguard against being falsely named but, for those who are truly and properly named as fathers, it could be a channel of communication to help deliver them from the status of outsider in their own child's life. They can then undertake the responsibilities that fathering a child must entail.

I say that with some feeling. In some senses, I feel that I have come full circle in talking about this issue. Around 1989-90, I led for my party on social security on the first Child Support Agency Bill. Few things separated the parties on that Bill, but one thing that was very apparent was that we were not listening to anyone outside. We were not listening to Families Need Fathers or to battered wives. We did not have proper pre-legislative scrutiny. The result was that we reinvented that Bill—you can correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker—on at least five subsequent occasions. How many broken families, how much misery and how many suicides did that oversight cost us?

We now have a chance to put the history right. We have created a new commission to oversee this area, which is not just about punitively chasing and tracking down teen fathers or any other fathers. It is about developing policy and bringing those young fathers back into the family in a literal sense so that we have a chance to rewrite some of the unfortunate history that there has been in this policy field.

I look forward to the Minister's reply. I am not flattering her when I say that she has done a truly remarkable job in the short time that she has held this portfolio. Great progress has been made and I hope that she will confirm the Government's commitment to a balance between carrots and sticks, to much better cross-departmental working and, above all, to committing to find ways to intervene early, which is cheaper and more effective, rather than late, which is both expensive and less effective. If she does that, there will be many teen fathers who will be part of a family rather than apart from their family. Above all, many babies and children being born today in our country will be raised with a father and a mother, and will be much more able as both individuals and citizens of our society. They will be among the foremost to be grateful for a Government who take that opportunity and challenge.

8.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kitty Ussher): As is customary, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on securing the debate. I also thank him for his kind words and know that he speaks with considerable expertise—as he has mentioned, he chairs the board of the teenage pregnancy taskforce in his constituency. Moreover, I know that he shares my strong personal interest in getting the policy right. He has made a clear contribution locally in Nottingham, and as he has mentioned, he recently met senior officials from CMEC, as well as officials from the Department for Work and Pensions. We very much welcome that engagement, so I thank him for it.

As I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware, he raised several issues that cross a number of Departments and challenged us to be joined up in our response. He has mentioned policy areas that are the direct responsibility of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Ministry of Justice, and my humble Department, the Department for Work and Pensions. I will attempt to give him a cross-departmental response, because he is absolutely right that we need to solve the issues by working together.

I want to start with my hon. Friend's key insight: of course, all children have two parents, and over time, the widespread use of the phrase "single parent" or "lone parent" in the media has drawn attention away from the fact that there are almost always two parents around, as well as the child or children involved. My hon. Friend rightly reminds us that our policies need to encompass everyone in separated families. Often, parents, whatever their age, who do not live with their children have a genuine desire to be more involved. Our role in government is to remove any barriers to that across the gamut of Government policy.

I welcome my hon. Friend's distinction between the separate issues of how we best support young people after they become parents, and how we best intervene so

that they can come to a mature decision about when is the best time to have children—that is, before they become parents. There is also a fundamental challenge across both issues: how do we help teenage girls and boys to break out of the pattern of behaviours that they see all around them—the very behaviours that have often led to child poverty being handed down from generation to generation? How do we break that cycle? How do we change the presumptions that society sometimes unfortunately makes?

I will address all the points that my hon. Friend made, starting with the issues that he raised about supporting fathers, particularly young fathers, into work, so that they can perhaps contribute from a more confident standpoint, and are, of course, more financially able to contribute. The cornerstone of our whole approach to welfare policy is a benefit and tax system that provides support for those who cannot work at the present time, but that provides every incentive for them to enter the world of work at the earliest possible opportunity. That might be full-time work, part-time work or preparing for work through training or education. In this debate, we have focused on young parents, but of course we want everybody in society to realise their potential.

The particular point about young parents is that if people's ambitions become thwarted or dented, or are never realised, due to lack of confidence at a young age, it is much harder to recover a sense of drive. There is always a second or indeed a third chance, particularly under this Government, but it is important to try to get it right first time round. That has been a consistent theme of the Government, and the Welfare Reform Bill, which is being debated in the other place, builds on the foundations that we have put in place over the past decade.

The issue is particularly important in the current economic climate. I know from my experience as a constituency MP how heartbreaking it is when a young person enters the job market for the first time and cannot find what they want because of the macro-economic situation, which is beyond their control, and then does not have the confidence to come back to it later. They may perhaps take a different path in life, often involving setting up home and having children. If the Government, through their welfare-to-work policy, are not able to give that person the chance that they need when they want it, all too often the opportunity does not arise again.

All Jobcentre Plus advisers are trained to help people find out what they are entitled to—to find their way through the benefits maze—and can guide people through filling in a claim form. If the young person is 16 or 17, someone will call them back within four hours to discuss the situation. If they are 18 or over, an adviser will contact them within 24 hours, once they have made their initial claim. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has made it quite clear that by the turn of the year young people between 18 and 24 who are verging on becoming long-term unemployed as a result of the recession will be guaranteed jobs or training precisely to try to avoid a whole generation of young people being abandoned on the scrapheap, as happened in previous recessions under previous Governments.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of the "couple penalty", as it is called in the jargon. Perhaps there is a perception that by separating, families can get more from the system. We are ever vigilant to make sure that that is not a real economic effect, and I have no evidence to assume that it is more or less relevant to younger parents. However, if my hon. Friend does have such evidence, we would like to keep it under close review. We want to allocate resources according to need, and not to create perverse incentives.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the issue of complexity. The situation does remain complex, and the December 2008 White Paper on welfare reform argued that a system of benefits fit for the 21st century should be simple to understand, well targeted and empowering, and that is our motivation through the successive stages of welfare reform, which must provide clarity and certainty for people making the transition between benefits and work. The White Paper committed the Government to exploring whether, over the long term, a single benefit is the right approach to make things simpler. The desire to reduce complexity lies behind, for example, the review of housing benefit that I am leading and on which I hope to report soon. Regardless of people's age, complexity is something that we must do our best to reduce.

My hon. Friend proposed a one-stop shop for young fathers. It is an interesting idea, but personally, I am not convinced at the moment. I think that it would be better if, in mainstream services, the entire government system can deal with young people's demands. I would be interested to hear of examples in which that is not the case, so that we can make sure that we correct them. However, I will bear his suggestion in mind.

The Government recognise that families are more diverse than ever before, and the issue of teen families proves that very point. The role of mothers and fathers in modern families is changing, and public services and the workplace must reflect those changes not only in benefits policy but across all public services. My hon. Friend is quite right that the outcomes for children are better when their fathers are involved. Moving on to the territory of my hon. Friends in the Department for Children, Schools and Families, it is worth saying that guidance on supporting teenage pregnancies was published by the DCSF and the Department of Health in July 2007, setting out what local areas should have in place to improve outcomes for teenage parents, both mothers and fathers, and their children.

Fathers' ability to become involved is, I agree with my hon. Friend, sometimes hindered by service providers who do not appreciate the role that they could, or do, play, particularly if they are not visible to the service provider, who consequently does not take their needs into account. If someone does not ask the question, "Are you a father?" when a young person comes into their sphere of influence, they might not realise the full extent of support that is required. We recommend that local services should take a much more proactive approach to identifying young fathers through the common assessment framework and targeted youth support arrangements. For example, young men who are not in education, employment or training should routinely be asked, as I have suggested, if they are a parent, so that we can build up a better picture of them and provide the support that they need as fathers. That includes the desire that we hope they will have to support their children and earn a wage sufficient to do so, regardless of whether they live with them.

[Kitty Ussher]

The "Think Fathers" campaign was launched at the end of 2008 to effect a change in attitudes and behaviour and to help deliver more father-friendly practice across the board, following the publication of research that showed that engagement and support for fathers from the DCSF and children's services was patchy. We agree that a more focused approach to the issue is needed, and we are in the process of trying to achieve that.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the Welfare Reform Bill contains significant change on joint birth registration. The answer to his question whether an unmarried father's name can appear on the birth certificate without his knowledge is no. That is crucial to the way the system works. A mother would, by law, have to name the father if she knew who it was, or she would be committing perjury. The father would then be contacted and asked to confirm that. The father's name would then appear on the birth certificate. Yes, the birth certificate is only a piece of paper, but it is a legal piece of paper and it has huge ceremonial and cultural significance. We are clear that at the crucial moment when a father comes to terms with fatherhood and perhaps deep down wants to get involved, it is a little nudge in the right direction, rather than a barrier preventing him from doing so.

One aim of the joint birth registration provision is that an unmarried father who registers his child's birth will acquire parental responsibility, whereas under the current system, if parents are not married to each other, a mother can prevent the father from registering, and he would need to apply for a court order. Also under the current system, an unmarried father may refuse to register, even if the mother wants him to do so. It would be illegal for him to refuse under the new system. I hope that that will be welcome.

Mr. Allen: Moving away from the slightly punitive aspect that my hon. Friend has been describing, is that not a fantastic opportunity to communicate with fathers? If the father's name, and presumably his address, are known, it is open to the relevant agencies to inform him about parenting classes, and about how to use the right services to keep their family together, sustain relationships and so on. That moment is a great opportunity for early intervention that might bring a number of fathers back to the mother and child, help them to realise their responsibilities and equip them to do the job more effectively.

Kitty Ussher: We certainly need to find a way to make it easy to do that. There is an inherent tension between the role of registrars and wider social policy, because registrars are, by definition, very important clerks—they register. They do not have a wider social policy goal. I agree with what my hon. Friend is trying to achieve, but there may be other ways of doing that, which I shall come to.

I shall deal next with the extra dimension added by CMEC, which my hon. Friend has mentioned. From the outset, the difference between the commission and the CSA, which forms part of it, is that it has a wider role, which is extremely ambitious but cuts to the core of what my hon. Friend wants to achieve, which is to change the culture of society. The commission's work in this area has not begun, but it has some exciting ideas for creating a society where parents recognise their responsibilities towards children and the responsibilities that come from sexual relationships as part of that, rather than that being an add-on when events force people down that route.

The innovative work that my hon. Friend is doing in Nottingham will be watched carefully by staff at CMEC, as well as by officials in my Department, to see whether there are wider lessons that can be learned. My hon. Friend is ahead of the curve in many areas, which is extremely useful as policy develops.

The commission's "Options" service is available to both parents to help them determine the best maintenance arrangement for their circumstances. The CSA's role is to alleviate child poverty by ensuring that money flows to children. That is and should be its primary role, but the people who contact it may be in need of other sorts of help. That can be a means of keeping families together and/or involving absent parents with the upbringing of their children, regardless of the state of the relationship between the two parents. The "Options" service can signpost parents to other services, such as mediation and third-sector support, which can include mentoring and so on. The challenge is to ensure that, when there is a clear need, the "Options" service points people in the right direction. It can help parents to come to arrangements that may include support in kind and the transfer of objects rather than money, and it can encourage people to understand what a private arrangement looks and feels like. That is crucial to a relationship between separated parents that works in the interests of the child, and there is potential in those services.

Mr. Drew: The Minister will have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) talk about contact centres, and I should like to pay due regard to those people who organise them. It is the most difficult job for all sorts of reasons: people do not necessarily go there willingly, and they are certainly not there to talk to their former partner in the best of manners. However, the people who run the centres are amazingly important to our whole system, and I hope that the Minister agrees that they are worthy of comment.

Kitty Ussher: Indeed. I welcome my hon. Friend's contribution and completely agree. Contact centres have an important role to play in the tapestry of policy in certain circumstances, and it is not easy to work there, so I pay tribute to the staff and, indeed, to everyone involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North raised the issue of lower socio-economic groups, to use his words, and how they respond to the options that the "Options" service presents. He made an extremely valid point about monitoring and, to ensure that people do not drop out of the system as the law changes, I have made it a top personal priority to monitor "Options" service usage and the number of people who go through formal or informal arrangements. He has put his finger on a crucial issue, but I should like to reassure him that we have no evidence of such activity—and we do have as much evidence as it is possible to have. As time goes on and more data become available, however, monitoring will certainly be our top priority.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out that, from April 2010, child maintenance will be fully disregarded in the calculation of benefits. It will have a huge psychological impact on people's desire to contribute but a very real financial impact on the families concerned. The commission is also carrying out research into why some parents choose not to make maintenance payments and how such behaviour may be changed. Once we have the results, we can take the appropriate policy action. Of course, in circumstances where behaviour does not change and the non-resident parent is liable to pay maintenance, which is means-tested, the commission has an enhanced range of enforcement powers, including the powers in the Welfare Reform Bill.

Cutting to a point that both my hon. Friends made, I should say that the commission is also involved in the development of the pilots that the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families announced in December 2008. They will test the impact of providing more accessible and better co-ordinated local services for separating and separated parents. It is a potentially exciting policy. The pilots will start later this year and include advice on child maintenance and child contact and residence as part of the same service, and advice on child care benefits and tax credits. They will enable us to see whether we can use holistic services along the lines of the Australian approach, which my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North mentioned, to provide a more effective service to support separated families. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions visited Australia last week specifically to look at how such centres work in practice.

It is worth touching on the question whether there should be a relationship between financial support and contact. I completely understand that some aggravation is often felt: there is no love lost between separating parents if someone pays maintenance but is not able to have contact. However, it is important to separate the two arrangements, and I do not think that people can pay for contact, which is perhaps what would follow. There is an important, softer point as well. If separated or separating parents of whatever age can come to a financial arrangement, which is often the hardest thing to negotiate, I see no reason why they should not take confidence from that and come to an arrangement about contact. We encourage people to start with the finances but not to see that as the end of the negotiation. That is one of the important reasons why people, even those on benefits, are able to opt out of compulsory CSA negotiation. If they are able and willing to come to their own private arrangements, the chances are that there will be a kernel of an opportunity for the parents to talk. That would help the children by helping an agreement on contact to be reached. If that fails, there is always the opportunity to go to court.

I am aware that we have the luxury of being able to talk for several hours, but I will not detain the House for much longer. I just want to touch on the issue of supporting children prior to parenthood and how best to provide them with the life skills to make mature decisions about their futures—including when to have children and how to break out of negative behaviours that they see around them. I am sure that we all share concerns about England's high rates of teenage pregnancy compared with those of most other developed countries. That is why we launched the 10-year teenage pregnancy strategy in 1999, following a detailed report from the social exclusion unit.

Since then, we have achieved a 10.7 per cent. fall in the conception rate among under-18s, and a 6.4 per cent. fall in that rate among under-16s, reversing a trend that had been going upwards. Within the overall reduction in teenage conceptions, teenage births have fallen by 23.3 per cent. Those falls are welcome, but we would not be having this debate if we did not recognise that the progress has not been fast enough.

I understand that there are particularly challenging circumstances in Nottingham; that is why we welcome my hon. Friend's contribution and engagements. To accelerate progress, the Minister for Children, Young People and Families and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo), at the Department of Health, recently announced additional support to help local areas reduce their birth rates further. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North mentioned the £20.5 million extra that there has been to improve young people's access to effective contraception, and support for parents so that they can talk to their children about sex and relationships. Of course we need to know how that money is being spent, and I shall pass on my hon. Friend's questions to colleagues at the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

I can exclusively reveal that the money is broken down into £10 million for local health services to ensure that contraception is available in the right places and at the right times. I am thinking especially of long-acting, reversible contraceptive measures, which science dictates will be more likely to be focused on girls; that does not mean, however, that the same principle will not apply to boys. Another £7 million goes towards a new media campaign on contraceptive choices to raise awareness of the different options. Department of Health Ministers have not yet decided whether there will be a particular focus on boys, although I hope that this debate will encourage them to do so. Furthermore, £1 million is directed towards the further education sector for on-site contraception. That sector is proving a particularly useful channel for making an impact on young people's views. There is also £2.5 million for the Healthy College programme. That follows the announcement last October that the Government intend to make personal, social and health education statutory in all schools, to ensure that young people have the knowledge and skills that they need to make safe and responsible choices.

I have already alluded to the issue, but my hon. Friend posed the question whether teenage pregnancy campaigns are too girl-centric and do not focus enough on boys. We know that boys tend to have fewer sources of information on sex and relationship issues and that they talk to their parents about them less. That is why, if done appropriately, the information that comes through teaching at schools is so crucial for boys. Department for Children, Schools and Families Ministers have commissioned Brook to produce revised guidance on contraception and sexual health services for boys and young men; that will be ready in autumn this year.

In many communities, including my own constituency, Brook provides a valuable and often credible service to boys and young men. We look forward to its advice. The whole issue of how sex education, including contraception,

[Kitty Ussher]

and child maintenance issues should be taught in schools is being considered as part of the Macdonald review. We will have an opportunity to discuss the issue in the months ahead.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the offer of becoming myth-buster general; I will do my best. Much stigma needs to be overcome. Gingerbread, the lobby group for single parents—those of all ages and genders, obviously—provides an excellent starting point. It does research among its own client group showing that single parents feel that their needs are not properly understood by society, particularly by the media. We in Government, and hon. Members on both sides of the House, have a leadership role in debunking some of the myths, and I encourage colleagues to do so.

My hon. Friend raised several interesting points about housing, some of which we are considering as part of the review of how housing benefit rules treat separated families. I would be interested in having his views on that when we have launched our consultation.

As for posters—yes, I am happy to consider those if we feel that they can have an effect. The changes to child maintenance may be a peg to hang that on, so let us keep talking about it.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving the House an opportunity to discuss such an important issue, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who is no longer in his place, for his engagement. I hope that my hon. Friend has been reassured that I and my ministerial colleagues across Whitehall take this issue very seriously. I am not alone in commending his deep personal commitment to changing the lives of teenage parents in his constituency. I hope that from the lessons that he is learning locally we can develop national solutions that will affect the lives of even more of them.

Question put and agreed to.

9.1 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 3 June 2009

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

THE VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address of 20th May, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Amyas Morse to the Office of Comptroller and Auditor General, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Presbyterian Mutual Society

1. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the collapse of the Presbyterian Mutual Society on savers in Northern Ireland. [277583]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): The hon. Lady will know that responsibility for the oversight of the Presbyterian Mutual Society is a matter for the devolved Administration, as registration is devolved to Northern Ireland. None the less, she might wish to know that my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I are taking a close interest in the forthcoming interim report by the administrator.

Ann Winterton: Bearing in mind that the Presbyterian Mutual Society is in administration mainly because of panic withdrawals following the Chancellor's guarantee to the UK banking sector, will the Secretary of State persuade the Chancellor and the Prime Minister that a similar guarantee scheme should be extended to provident and mutual societies? After all, what is good enough for the Dunfermline building society is surely good enough for the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

Mr. Woodward: I absolutely understand the hon. Lady's concern for the 9,500 investors of the PMS, but it is important for her to recognise that there is a significant difference between the status of the PMS and that of the Dunfermline building society, which she has mentioned. It is critical that she understand that the individuals who invested money in the PMS were investors, not savers. She refers to panic withdrawals, but it is also significant to note that no other industrial and provident society has got into similar difficulties. That will not make life easier for the families involved, but I look forward to seeing the administrator's interim report.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that those who put their money into the Presbyterian Mutual Society did so believing that they were savers, rather than investors? That is how they understood the situation. Young families and old people with lifetime investments are now caught up in grievance and distress because of a situation that is not of their making. Will the Secretary of State explain why a variant of the model used to relieve the situation of the Dunfermline building society is not being used by the Treasury in response to the situation of the Presbyterian Mutual Society?

Mr. Woodward: Part of the answer to that is that the PMS is not a building society. Having said that, I believe that it is significant that when the Financial Services Authority looked into the matter, it noted that the PMS was conducting

"regulated activities without the necessary authorisation or exemption".

The FSA also states that

"we remain in touch with the administrator and, if further information comes to light relating to the issues we have investigated, we will look into it."

This is an important matter, and I say to the hon. Gentleman that we are keeping a close eye on it. We look forward to seeing the report from the FSA and from the administrator as soon as possible.

Dr. William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): In October, the Treasury guaranteed that no British customers of Icesave would lose their savings after that Icelandic online bank collapsed. The Prime Minister went on to issue a blanket guarantee that its 300,000 UK customers would get all their money back. Why can he not give the same guarantee to those who have savings with the Presbyterian Mutual Society? Does the Secretary of State not realise the gravity of the situation for many ordinary, decent people in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Woodward: We do recognise the gravity of the situation, which is why the Prime Minister, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I are keeping a close eye on it, and why the Prime Minister has been in correspondence and discussion with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and looks forward to having further discussions with the First Minister later this month. We appreciate the gravity of the situation, but we equally have to recognise that, under the law, those people who put money into the PMS did so not as savers, but as investors, and that the regulation of this body in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of devolved government in Northern Ireland, not of Whitehall. Nevertheless, we do not intend to say simply that because the matter is the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, we have no interest in seeing what we might be able to do to help. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister continues to take an active interest in the matter and will engage with the hon. Member for South Antrim (Dr. McCrea) and his colleagues about it.

John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): Since the Treasury Committee took evidence in Belfast a number of months ago on the banking crisis, I have continually been in contact with many of the distressed savers, as well as with the moderator of the Presbyterian Church, Dr. Donald Patton. I have also had meetings with Lord Myners and I have written to the administrator, Arthur Boyd. There is an issue here about the Financial Services Authority getting in touch. If the Northern Ireland Executive, the Presbyterian Church itself and Her Majesty's Treasury got together, I think that we could get a solution. There is a need for added urgency, and I ask the Secretary of State to take that message back to ensure that we get justice for many of these distressed people.

Mr. Woodward: I welcome my right hon. Friend's intervention, and it is a mark of his interest in these matters that he came and took hearings in Northern Ireland. I know that all hon. Members would want to welcome his work and contribution. As I said, the Prime Minister continues to take an active interest the matter, as does my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary, and we will continue to follow it up. There are issues about the regulation of bodies such as the PMS in Northern Ireland and they will need to be addressed. There will be lessons to be learned for the future. For the 9,500 investors, I appreciate that there are real and pressing questions—particularly for those who invested less than £20,000. We all have a duty to do what we can to help them—and that also goes for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs is very grateful to the Treasury Committee for the initiative that it has taken? We would have liked to look into the matter, but as the Secretary of State says, it is devolved. Every member of the Committee has received representations that underline the severity of the situation, so will he please take up the suggestion just made by the right hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (John McFall), the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, and convene a meeting of all the interested parties to try to reach a solution?

Mr. Woodward: As always, I welcome the advice of the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, who always has a considered approach to these matters. I am prepared to work to bring people together. Equally, however—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman shares my view—I am very conscious of the fact that if government is devolved, that must be recognised, and we cannot suddenly be seen to be trying to take control of an issue through the back door simply because we are not quite sure whether it is being handled in the way we might have wanted. This is an issue on which I do not think the 9,500 investors will thank Members of this House or of the Assembly for simply saying, "Bureaucracy means that we cannot help." I am prepared to break the bureaucracy, and if that is taken in which it is meant, I am prepared to work with the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to help those investors.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said, and he now seems to be warming up and willing to take this on. It does not matter how often he says that the Prime Minister takes an active interest in the matter; the test is whether he is going to do anything with some dispatch. That is what the House wants. It is not a question of devolved administration; the issue has arisen against the backdrop of the economic and banking crisis, which is a matter for the First Lord of the Treasury, the Prime Minister. This House wants him to proceed as if this were happening in Greater London, where 900,000 investors would be kicking up, and everyone would be demanding debates and action this day.

Mr. Woodward: As always, the Churchillian recognition of my hon. Friend is helpful in allowing me to enjoy this a little more; I am tempted to say I am enjoying this, but perhaps I should resist that.

We have to recognise again that these are not savers; they were investors. As such, they made an investment as risk capital in the form of withdrawable shares and loans. There is an issue about whether or not this should have been regulated; it was registered; it should have been regulated. There is an issue that I continue to want the FSA to look at, but I am not trying to evade our responsibility. If we can find a way to help these people, we should do so. I am prepared to break the bureaucracy to do it, if it is at all possible.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It was the Government's guarantee to other banks and the failure of regulation that brought about the collapse of the Presbyterian Mutual. I met the former moderator and the general secretary on Monday, and I was shocked to learn that they had written to the Prime Minister three times since November, but he had sent only one holding reply. I was also surprised to find out that the Secretary of State had not met them. The Prime Minister is the architect of the current financial regulatory system. If his Presbyterian conscience extended to Dunfermline, why will he not apply it to the Presbyterian Mutual?

Mr. Woodward: First, I want to acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman is the most assiduous visitor to Northern Ireland who has ever held the Opposition spokesman's job. He cannot help but be there at least half of every week, and we should acknowledge that. I just wish that he would sometimes learn a bit more while he was there. As I have said to him, the Presbyterian Mutual Society is made up not of savers but of investors. The issue is devolved, and I know he has a problem with that—of course, his party has formed an alliance with the Ulster Unionists in the hope of making some progress nationally—but the fact is that devolution has happened. He must respect, rather than undermine, devolution. The Prime Minister has taken an interest in the matter and met the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on it. We have held discussions, and further meetings will take place. But the hon. Gentleman must respect the fact that devolution does not mean bringing the matter back to Westminster through the back door.

Mr. Paterson: Contrast that with the clarity of the right hon. Gentleman's successor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), who said at a public meeting in Ballymena two weeks ago:

"I am not here to make spending promises. But what I can tell you is that if I was Prime Minister I would take a very good look at whether people are being treated fairly. So I think this is a real case for the Prime Minister to think again".

So, will the Secretary of State answer directly the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack)? Will the right hon. Gentleman agree to take a delegation representing the Presbyterian Mutual and the savers to see the Prime Minister in the next couple of weeks, to find a solution to protect many innocent people who fear the loss of their life savings?

Mr. Woodward: Once again, we recognise the problem of the 9,500 savers. The hon. Gentleman refers to the leader of his party, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron)—and I must admit that I know a thing or two about Witney. He did travel to Northern Ireland, and he said to people that he was not there to make spending promises. As my hon. Friends know, that is probably because everywhere he goes he is promising to make 10 per cent. cuts, should we ever see him in government. The people of Northern Ireland should pay careful attention to the words of the hon. Gentleman's leader, because he would be very bad news for them. He does not understand the problems of Northern Ireland or of the Presbyterian Mutual, or that the Presbyterian Mutual is made up of investors not savers. As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will meet the First Minister and Deputy First Minister again to see what can be done to help such people, not with empty slogans and hollow promises but with real action—and not by doing nothing.

Decommissioning

2. **Angela Watkinson** (Upminster) (Con): What assessment he has made of progress in decommissioning of arms by loyalist paramilitary organisations; and if he will make a statement. [277564]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Shaun Woodward): I would like to take this opportunity to express the condolences of the whole House to the family of Kevin McDaid, who was murdered last Sunday week, and also to Damian Fleming, who was badly attacked and suffered serious injuries. The Government totally condemn those responsible for those serious crimes. The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning continues to make progress with those paramilitary organisations that have engaged with the decommissioning process.

Angela Watkinson: I thank the Minister for his response, but the Independent Monitoring Commission's assessment of the likelihood of decommissioning by the Ulster Defence Association is that it is difficult to judge what turn events might take and when. Given the qualified position of the Independent Monitoring Commission on judging such matters, what makes the Secretary of State think that any progress will be made within the next 12 weeks?

Mr. Woodward: I am grateful for the interest that the hon. Lady and her hon. Friends take in this matter. We have to rely on the IICD for advice on such matters. Its independence means that we do not know what it is doing and where. I have meetings with it, and it has informed me that it continues to make meaningful progress in dialogue with the organisations concerned, but as I have said, if we can find another route for decommissioning, we should take it, which is why we have. Such a system is not adopted instead of law and order, and it does not allow people to retain their guns indefinitely, but it might be the only way to get them in. The House should be in no doubt: if the IICD tells me in August that it has not made meaningful progress, I am committed to ending the decommissioning process immediately.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down) (SDLP): I wish to associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about the horrendous murder of Kevin McDaid and about Damien Fleming. That really was an horrendous setback for our society in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State informed us in October 2007 that meaningful engagement and negotiation had already taken place with the independent decommissioning body. On 1 April this year, he said that if

"there has been no meaningful progress"

in negotiation by the middle of August, he would terminate the decommissioning legislation. Can he tell us what he means by "meaningful progress"? Is it to be interpreted as the handing in of all weaponry by the UDA and associated loyalists by mid-August, and does it mean that there will be no more provocation in regard to the abandonment of the decommissioning legislation?

Mr. Woodward: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the role that he continues to play in helping to deal with the legacy of the past in relation to sectarianism. I acknowledge that in his opening remarks.

I do not think it is helpful for me to give the House a running commentary on how the IICD is progressing. It has an outstanding track record in achieving decommissioning on the part of paramilitary organisations since its establishment. If the IICD tells me, as Secretary of State, that it is making meaningful progress in dialogue with those organisations, I think that we have a duty for the next 12 weeks to stick with it in good faith.

Mr. Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that while decommissioning by loyalist paramilitaries is important, it is equally important for the weapons used last night in west Belfast to shoot a young man to be decommissioned, and for organisations such as the Irish National Liberation Army and other republican splinter groups to be brought into the decommissioning loop. It is important for their weapons to be taken out of society as well.

Mr. Woodward: It is important for all weapons to be taken out of society. It is my view that none of these instruments, whether they be guns or whether they be knives, has any place in a normal, decent, civilised society. We have a duty in the House to ensure that we do everything we can to find every means possible to remove these weapons from the streets and from people's homes. There is no doubt that they contribute to sectarian violence.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he has done in this regard. As Father Keaney, the priest who presided over the funeral of Kevin McDaid, said earlier this week, we must all see what we can do to remove

"the prejudices of the past".

That is the action that we must take together, and I have no doubt that if we take it and maintain the political momentum in Northern Ireland, right will win and evil will lose.

Mr. Jim Devine (Livingston) (Lab): I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I associate myself with what my right hon. Friend said about the death of Kevin McDaid, but is my right hon. Friend aware that press reports are suggesting that members of the police force texted loyalist groups to tell them that tricolours were being raised in the community, and is the matter being investigated?

Mr. Woodward: I am aware of those press reports. Indeed, on Saturday evening this week I spoke to the Chief Constable, who had been made aware of the stories. He has investigated the matter, and I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that the Chief Constable can find no evidence whatsoever to support the allegations that were made in the newspaper.

Let me say again that the best way in which we can deal with sectarian violence is by confronting these issues, which are the legacy of the past. We must uphold law and order, we must be firm in our justice, and we must ensure that we do everything we can to send a clear signal to young and old people that guns have no place in Northern Ireland today.

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Let me associate myself and my party with the Secretary of State's comments about the murder of Kevin McDaid. It was a truly brutal and, indeed, evil act. Does the Secretary of State not accept, however, that its true significance lies in its demonstration that in the minds of those would style themselves loyalist paramilitaries, there has been no movement away from—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is unfair. Hon. Members are speaking about Northern Ireland, which is a very serious matter, and there is a great noise of conversation in the Chamber.

Mr. Carmichael: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Does the Secretary of State agree that when de Chastelain reports in August, we do not want to hear about talks and progress? What we want is confirmation that the weapons have been decommissioned and that there will be no more chances after August.

Mr. Woodward: I have made it very clear to the House that there will be no chances after August unless we are told by the IICD that there has been meaningful progress, so there is no question of the period being extended in the absence of that progress, but again I say that decommissioning in relation to sectarianism in Northern Ireland is only a part of the issue. In the words of the chief executive of the Community Relations Council, we must all talk now about the need for a shared, united society, stop the talk of us and them and unite to turn the hatred of the past into a society of cohesion and normality with no guns at all.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I entirely endorse what the Secretary of State said and condemn the cowardly and murderous attacks on Kevin McDaid and Damian Fleming recently. We hear what the Secretary of State has said about the decommissioning of the arms held by the so-called loyalist groups, but I remind him that, on Thursday 5 February, on behalf of Her Majesty's official Opposition, I reluctantly agreed to support the Government in extending the arms decommissioning amnesty for the 12th year on the specific promise that there were moves to start decommissioning within weeks. That has not happened. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that if arms decommissioning has not taken place by the August deadline, he will make a statement in the House immediately?

Mr. Woodward: I again say to the hon. Gentleman that we should remember that the work of the IICD has achieved a transformation of weapons held by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, not least those weapons held by PIRA. In a succession of instances with regard to decommissioning, that has led to the current state of play. I am grateful for his support this year on that matter, but it will not help the work of the IICD if I make a running commentary on information, including Security Service information. I simply say to him that I believe that it was the right thing to do and I believe that in August he will see the fruits of that labour.

Community Projects (Funding)

3. **Dr. Alasdair McDonnell** (Belfast, South) (SDLP): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of churches and other faith-based organisations which do not apply for funding from the national lottery for religious reasons on alternative sources of funding for their community projects. [277585]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Paul Goggins): I have had no such discussions as national lottery matters and the listed places of worship scheme are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I understand that, in addition, the Northern Ireland Departments operate several funding programmes which are open to Northern Ireland churches and other faith-based organisations.

Dr. McDonnell: Is the Minister aware that churches and faith-based groups have made a valuable contribution to local communities and to wider society in Northern Ireland—a cost-effective contribution, mostly volunteer led? A recent study has shown that 70 or 75 per cent. of volunteer activity around youth groups is led by faith-based groups. Many of those groups have ethical difficulties availing themselves of lottery money. Has he done anything, or can he offer any suggestions? Will he meet those people in an effort to find alternative sources of funding?

Paul Goggins: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the churches in Northern Ireland and faith-based organisations that provide so much by way of community activity, particularly aimed at young people and excluded people. There is a range of funding opportunities for church groups that have a problem with the national lottery. They can apply to different Departments in Northern Ireland. I hope that, with the transfer of money from dormant bank and building

society accounts, there will be future opportunities and that faith-based groups will have less of a problem in applying under those schemes.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I knew this question was important, but I did not know that it deserved the acclaim it got from the House earlier.

Does the Minister recognise that in many communities churches provide the main source of community activity for the elderly, the young and others, and that because of some deeply held beliefs the infrastructure that would normally be funded through the lottery fund cannot be funded? Will he look at ways of ensuring that those areas that require and rely on church facilities are not disadvantaged?

Paul Goggins: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. It is true not only in Northern Ireland, but in all our constituencies, that churches and faith-based organisations make a real difference. I acknowledge the problems some churches have in making applications to the national lottery. I say again that the new dormant bank and building society accounts proposal might be a way of getting money to those organisations. They play an important part, but I am sure, too, that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the £773 million invested in communities in Northern Ireland through the national lottery has also made a huge difference to local communities.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [277568] **Mr. Mike Weir** (Angus) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 3 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): Before listing my engagements, I know that the whole House will join me in expressing our condolences to the families and friends of the seven servicemen who have lost their lives since we last met: Corporal Stephen Bolger of 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment; Lance Corporal Robert Richards of the Armoured Support Group, the Royal Marines; Lance Corporal Kieron Hill of 2nd Battalion, the Mercian Regiment; Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett of the Light Dragoons; Fusilier Petero Suesue of 2nd Battalion, the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers; Sapper Jordan Rossi of 38 Engineer Regiment, the Royal Engineers; and the soldier from the 2nd Battalion, the Rifles, who was killed yesterday. These are exceptionally brave men, whose service should not, and will not, ever be forgotten. Recent operations have shown that we will not allow the Taliban to jeopardise the future of a free and democratic Afghanistan, and the whole country should be rightly proud of the sacrifice these men have made.

I have also to report that we have strong reason to believe that a British citizen, Edwin Dyer, has been murdered by an al-Qaeda cell in Mali. I, as will the whole House, utterly condemn this appalling and barbaric act of terrorism. Our thoughts and condolences are with the family. I have talked to the President of Mali. He knows he will have every support in rooting out al-Qaeda from his country. I want those who use terror against this country and against British citizens to know beyond doubt that they will be hunted down and brought to justice. There will be no hiding place for them, and there will be no safe haven for terrorists who attack our country.

This morning, I had ministerial meetings with colleagues, and in addition to my duties in the House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Weir: I represent 45 Commando, which has recently returned from a deployment in Afghanistan where, unfortunately, it lost nine men. My colleagues and I would like to associate ourselves with the condolences expressed by the Prime Minister for these brave men who lost their lives in Afghanistan recently, and also for the family of Mr. Dyer.

Just now, we are seeing the pathetic sight of the Cabinet attempting to reshuffle itself. When will the Prime Minister accept that he has lost all authority and call an election?

The Prime Minister: There is work to be done every day to deal with the recession. If we had taken the advice of the other parties, we would not have taken action to nationalise the banks, and we would not have taken action to deal with the problems that small businesses face and that people face with unemployment. These are the actions that are needed, and this Government are taking such action every day.

Q2. [277569] **Dr. Howard Stoate** (Dartford) (Lab): At last year's Union for the Mediterranean summit, my right hon. Friend gave his backing to concentrated solar power as a means of providing almost limitless clean energy for Europe. Given that more than 170 Members of this House have signed an early-day motion supporting concentrated solar power and the development of a high-voltage, direct-current supergrid, what active steps is my right hon. Friend taking to work with our international partners to make this a reality?

The Prime Minister: This is a serious issue that needs European co-operation for it to happen. Our target is for 15 per cent. of energy consumption to come from renewable sources. We have spent more than £11 million over the last few years to support solar installations, and we will publish the renewable energy strategy, setting out our strategy to meet these renewable targets. We will work with all countries in Europe to develop a renewables strategy.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the soldier from 2nd Battalion The Rifles who was killed in Helmand province yesterday. We will also remember Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett, Corporal Stephen Bolger, Lance Corporal Kieron Hill, Lance Corporal Robert Richards, Sapper Jordan Rossi and Fusilier Suesue. All of them have been killed in the past fortnight serving their country—we will not forget their sacrifice and we must care for their families.

I also join the Prime Minister in sending condolences to the family and friends of Edwin Dyer, who, it is believed, has been brutally murdered by terrorists in Mali. This must be a simply horrific time for his family, and I am sure that everyone in the country is thinking

about them. In spite of all the difficulties though, the Prime Minister is right to say that we must never give in to terrorists.

This morning, the Communities Secretary resigned from the Cabinet. That follows yesterday's announcement that the Children's Minister is standing down, the Minister from the Cabinet Office is leaving and the Home Secretary is resigning. Why does not the Prime Minister accept that his ability to command his Cabinet has simply disappeared?

The Prime Minister: I think the first thing that the whole House would want to do is acknowledge the great work that has been done by both the Home Secretary and the Communities Secretary in the Cabinet. At a time like this, the House should come together to acknowledge contributions that have been made in the public interest. May I also say that under the Home Secretary what we have seen is crime come down, neighbourhood policing introduced, the fight on terrorism stepped up and better relationships between the police and the community? I have to remind the Conservative party that crime doubled under a Conservative Government and policing numbers were cut.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister is in denial. If these people have done such good work, why are they walking away from their jobs? The Communities Secretary's statement does not pay tribute to him or a single one of his policies. Let us be clear about what is happening: the Minister in charge of local government is resigning the day before the local elections. Is not the fact that she has chosen today of all days to go a direct challenge to his authority?

The Prime Minister: I think some people should take a step back and understand what has been happening. The past few weeks have been difficult for every Member in every part of this House. People have to recognise, in the politicking that goes on, that there have been enormous pressures on people and that while the public are angry, there have also been family pressures on Members of this House. That is true of those in all parts of the House, and I think that we have a responsibility to all Members of the House in this. Yes, there are elements of party politics that the right hon. Gentleman would want to raise, but he has to acknowledge that in all parts of the House there are issues that people want to sort out.

Mr. Cameron: I have to say to the Prime Minister that if this was about expenses, the Communities Secretary would have resigned weeks ago. The fact is that she has chosen to resign today. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Do not shout down the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Cameron: Yes— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Remember that there is a danger of the House being suspended if people continue to shout. That is the danger, and there will be no Prime Minister's Question Time. *[Interruption.]* That goes for both sides of the House.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister talks about pressures. I have to say that those pressures on the Communities Secretary and on others in his Cabinet include No. 10 directly briefing against them. The fact is that what we see is a dysfunctional Cabinet and a dysfunctional Government led by a Prime Minister who cannot give a lead. Can he perhaps at least guarantee that there will be no further resignations ahead of his reshuffle?

The Prime Minister: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that for those on both sides of the House the events of the past few weeks have been difficult. It would be unfair for us to pass this Question Time without acknowledging that in each part of the House people have found it difficult with the pressures upon them. I want also to pay tribute to the Communities Secretary for the work that she has done, because she has brought new relationships between local government and central Government with the local government concordat, she has sponsored urban regeneration in shopping centres in our country and she has been active in building better relationships with the Muslim communities. At a time like this, it is the duty of all of us, in all parts of the House, to recognise the contributions that people have made.

As for what he says about the Government, we have two jobs of work to do. One is to clean up the expenses system. I think that everybody else in the House except him agrees that we have to take action now to clean up that system. The second thing is that we have got to take this country through the recession. The remarkable thing about the Leader of the Opposition is that this is yet another week when there has been not one question on policy.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister must understand that the issue here is his leadership. The failure of the Government on appearance is not as bad as their failure on substance. Let me turn to the issue of the economy and let us take just one key individual, the person responsible for steering us through this recession: the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Prime Minister refuses to talk about him in anything other than the past tense. We know that the Home Secretary is going, we know that the Communities Secretary is going, so can the Prime Minister tell us whether the Chancellor, sitting there in front of us, will still be in his post in a week's time?

The Prime Minister: Once again, that is nothing to do with policy. The right hon. Gentleman is incapable of dealing with the big issues that face this country. Let me say what this Chancellor is achieving. This Chancellor is leading the rest of the world in taking us out of recession. This Chancellor has taken action that the Conservative party has refused to support. What happened when we had to deal with the banks? What would the Conservatives have done? Nothing. What would they have done when we were helping mortgage holders? [Hon. Members: "Nothing."] Nothing. What would they have done when we were helping the unemployed? [Hon. Members: "Nothing."] Nothing. What is their policy? To do nothing. That is not the basis on which to ask for an election.

Mr. Cameron: If the Chancellor is doing such a good job, will the Prime Minister tell us whether he will be there in a week's time?

The Prime Minister: I have said that the Chancellor is doing a very good job, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman would agree with me. The Conservatives are the only party to want an election when they have no policy to deal with the recession. They want an election, but they have no policy to help home owners. They want an election, but they have no policy to help the unemployed. That is a party that talks, talks and talks but has nothing to do with action.

Mr. Cameron: If the Prime Minister is not happy with our policies, why does he not call an election and test them out? The Prime Minister needs to realise how important this is. Why should the British public believe the Chancellor if the Prime Minister does not have confidence in him? Why should international markets have confidence in the Chancellor if the Prime Minister does not have confidence in him? That is why this is so serious. The Prime Minister told us that he had the right team to take the country forward. That team is now deserting him. The Government are collapsing before our eyes. Why does he not take the one act of authority left to him—get down to the palace, ask for a dissolution and call that election?

The Prime Minister: Once again, the right hon. Gentleman proves to the whole country that there is absolutely no substance in anything that he says. We have to clean up the electoral system, and we are doing that. We are cleaning up the expenses system. The second thing that we are doing is cleaning up the economy and ensuring that it comes out of recession. The party opposite has no policies to deal with that. It is words, words and words. We will get on with the action.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has worked hard, along with the Business Secretary, to bring about a positive solution to the future of Vauxhall. Many of my constituents, of course, are not aware of what has happened behind the scenes. Will my right hon. Friend give them the assurance that the Government will continue with the high level of support that is being offered and will the Government distance themselves from the statements that it is not desirable to rescue the motor industry that have been made by the Liberal Democrats?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has been a great supporter of Ellesmere Port and the car industry there. This is what people in the country are concerned about: the jobs of workers in car factories and in the car supply industry. That is why we have been working with General Motors and the two potential buyers. We are now working with the preferred buyer for General Motors and our determination is to save Vauxhall jobs in this country and to make sure that people have a secure future. We have also, as hon. Members know, introduced a scheme that allows people to sell cars that are more than 10 years old, and now 35,000 people have bought cars as a result of that, so we are doing whatever we can to move the car industry forward. I just have to say to this House that that would not be possible unless we were prepared to put public funds into making that happen; I am afraid that that is rejected by the Opposition.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I would like to add my own expressions of sympathy and condolence to the families of Fusilier Petero Suesue, Sapper Jordan Rossi, Lance Corporal Robert Richards, Lance Corporal Kieron Hill, Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett, Corporal Stephen Bolger, and the soldier from 2nd Battalion the Rifles who died yesterday. As has been said, they all served with great distinction and courage in Afghanistan. Of course, I would like to support the Prime Minister in his expressions of sympathy and condolence extended to the family and friends of Edwin Dyer.

We can now see that the Government are in total meltdown. The Prime Minister is thrashing around, fighting for his own political survival, but does he not understand the extreme danger to our democracy when people start feeling that there is simply no one in charge?

The Prime Minister: The dangers are when one does not deal with the problems that are before us. One of the problems is to deal with the expenses system in the House of Commons, and the second is to deal with the problems and challenges of the economy. I thought that the Liberal party would support us in the action that we are taking to help the unemployed, to help home owners, and to help small businesses, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will not join the other party in talking only about things other than policy. The country wants us to talk about what we are doing to help it.

Mr. Clegg: The Prime Minister just does not get it. His Government are paralysed by indecision, crippled by in-fighting, and exhausted after 12 long years. It is a tragedy that exactly at a time when people need help and action, the country does not have a Government; it has a void. Labour is finished. Is it not obvious that the only choice now is between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats?

The Prime Minister: I seem to remember the Liberals saying that at every election that I have ever fought. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the country needs action, and the action is coming from this Government. If he will listen to what we are doing, I think that he will find it very difficult to oppose the measures that we are taking to help the car industry, to help the banks, to help the unemployed, and to help those people who are home owners. We are the party with the ideas about how to take this country out of recession; neither of the main Opposition parties has anything to offer us.

Q3. [277570] **Mr. Andy Slaughter** (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend reaffirm the Government's commitment to decent, affordable homes for all? In the past month in west London, the decent homes programme has been described as upgrading the deckchairs on the Titanic, and social housing as an incentive not to improve one's lot through one's own efforts. Will he condemn the Tory politicians who made those comments?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When a Conservative council has cut the decent homes programme, and cut back on the investment in it, one does not need to look into a crystal ball to see what the Conservatives will do; one can see it in the

action that they are taking to cut decent homes in a constituency. I support my hon. Friend in taking up the case of the many people in his constituency who are looking for decent homes, and who look to their council to provide them.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): May I put it to the Prime Minister that the problem of Members' allowances falls within the remit of Sir Christopher Kelly's committee, and should be left there until it reports? The right hon. Gentleman has hinted that he wishes to gain a reputation as a constitutionalist over the issue, so may I suggest to him that as he is almost uniquely unsuited to play the role of a latter-day Thomas Jefferson, he should in fact look to the existing constitution and do as almost everyone in the country would ask him to do—use that traditional constitution to ask Her Majesty to dissolve this Parliament, so that the country can elect a new one?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's 300-year perspective on these issues. It is right that Sir Christopher Kelly's committee report. It is also right that we take further action to end the system of self-regulation in the House. It is not right that there emerges a conflict of interest between the public interest and MPs' interest. That is in none of our interests. Everybody wants it to stop. That is why an external regulator is of greater benefit to us, as well as being supported, I believe, in the whole country.

Q4. [277571] **Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the valiant campaign led by the Royal British Legion to have council tax benefit rebranded as a rebate, which would increase take-up and lift thousands of pensioners out of poverty, including up to 20,000 veterans. This Saturday marks the 65th anniversary of D-day. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this would be an appropriate time to announce such a change so that all pensioners, especially our veterans, who have served our country with courage and dignity, can live in dignity?

The Prime Minister: The whole House will want to honour today the sacrifice and service of all those people who were involved in the D-day landings, and all those who were involved in the sacrifice and service that made possible victory in the second world war and the peace that we now enjoy as a result. I want to pay tribute to the individual veterans who are still part of the Royal British Legion. I talked to the treasurer of my branch of the Royal British Legion only a few days ago. We have a delegation of the Royal British Legion coming in to see the Pensions Minister this afternoon. She is proposing that pension credit could be put in a new form, where it could be seen as a rebate. That will be discussed this afternoon. We want it to be as automatic as possible for pensioners to get their right, so we are prepared to discuss how we can move matters forward. I hope all sides of the House will support such a move.

Q5. [277572] **Paul Rowen** (Rochdale) (LD): With up to 50,000 home owners facing repossession this year, if the Government are doing so much to help them, why is it that only two people have been helped so far?

The Prime Minister: That is not correct. Thousands of people are being helped with the various schemes. The first is the mortgage income support scheme for people who are unemployed, which is now available for those with houses worth under £200,000, and large numbers of people are claiming that. The second is the moratorium that is available on people's building society and bank payments, which we negotiated with building societies. The third is the shared equity scheme, where we are prepared to buy a share of the house to help people move forward. Discussions on that are moving forward for large numbers of people. The fourth is the measures that we are taking to deal with the way in which the banks approach mortgages in the first place.

The recent report of the Council of Mortgage Lenders said that it expected repossessions to be far less than it had predicted, as a result of the action that we are taking. Any repossession is to be regretted. There are many circumstances in which repossessions happen—for example, if there is a family break-up which is nothing to do with the financial situation of an employee—but there are other situations where repossessions are caused by the lack of money. We are trying to help those people to maintain their mortgages and renegotiate them. I think the hon. Gentleman will find that no Government have done more to help mortgage payers to prevent repossessions. That is what a Labour Government are about. We will not walk by on the other side.

Q6. [277573] **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Prime Minister say when a decision will be taken about granting a pardon to Michael Shields, following the High Court's decision last December? Michael has now been in prison for four years, following what I firmly believe to be a gross miscarriage of justice.

The Prime Minister: Mr. Shields, as everybody knows, has applied for a free pardon within the terms of the High Court judgment that was handed down on 17 December. I understand the Shields family's concerns about delay. They have waited a long time. He has a large number of supporters. The Justice Secretary is determined to make the best and fairest decision he can, but he can do so only after, in the public interest, assessing all the material that is available. He expects to write to Mr. Shields' lawyers later this month.

Q7. [277574] **John Mason** (Glasgow, East) (SNP): Is the Prime Minister embarrassed that Britain is now a more unequal country than at any time since the 1960s, and specifically that the poorest 20 per cent. in society have lost real income since 2005, and the richest 20 per cent. have gained?

The Prime Minister: We have taken millions of people out of poverty. We have taken children out of poverty and we have taken pensioners out of poverty, and we have set new targets for child poverty and for pensioner poverty. As a result of this Labour Government, child benefit has been raised, working families tax credit has been introduced, and child tax credit has also been introduced, taking 1.5 million people out of poverty in itself. If we had followed the policies of the Scottish National party, we would be in a far worse position.

Q8. [277575] **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's attack on the abuse of expenses that has so revolted members of the public, but will he also take action to curb the dependence of many Members on second incomes? I have calculated that the Conservative Front-Bench team alone has 57 other sources of income up to £250,000. Would it not be better if, instead of an alternative Government with 57 varieties of special interest, we all concentrated on the job that we were elected to do?

The Prime Minister: All Members want to show that they are undertaking public service, and that they are in it not for what they can get but for what they can give. But one of the issues that repeatedly comes up is Members' second jobs, and it is right that Sir Christopher Kelly looks at the matter. *[Interruption.]* I hear some murmuring on the Opposition Benches. Methinks that they protest too much.

Q9. [277576] **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Will the Prime Minister find time today to meet the Pensions Action Group, which is outside lobbying Parliament on occupational pensions? Is he aware that although many of my constituents were offered 90 per cent., the reality is that they will probably get less than 70 per cent? Why is that? Does he feel in any way guilty that the changes that he made when he was Chancellor have destroyed what was once the best private pensions sector in the world?

The Prime Minister: We have already had a long debate in the House, some time ago, when I showed that the funds of pension funds doubled in the 10-year period that I was Chancellor. Despite what the hon. Gentleman says, all our changes made it possible for the pension funds to have large sums of money. The issue, however, as he knows perfectly well, is that pension funds' income depends on what happens on the stock exchange as much as on anything else, and he must know that that is what has affected most pension funds recently.

Q10. [277577] **Mark Lazarowicz** (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will have seen the latest scientific report showing that by the end of the century, global warming will be even more severe than was previously thought. We have gone beyond the stage at which we can stop irreversible damage to our planet, and now the question is whether we can stop environmental catastrophe. What will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the G8 summit, which is coming up shortly, recognises that point, so that we have the chance in Copenhagen to get the type of agreement that the planet so desperately needs?

The Prime Minister: We will lead the way at the G8 summit in proposing how we can solve the two problems that prevent a Copenhagen agreement. First, we need agreement on intermediate targets for carbon emissions reduction, and that requires us to persuade China and India, as well as America and Japan, to join the group of people who are prepared to commit to those targets. Secondly, finance must be provided to enable developing countries and emerging markets to make the investments that are necessary to reduce carbon emissions in those areas. We will come up with financing proposals, which we hope other countries will be prepared to support, but I must repeat today—I think it is relevant, because tomorrow people are voting on issues of Europe—that that cannot happen without co-operation across the European Union. Those parties that want to break from the European Union will have neither an economic policy that works for Britain nor an environmental policy. That is what we need, and we are going to push forward.

Q12. [277579] **Sandra Gidley** (Romsey) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is wrong to build on grade 2 agricultural land? If so, will he change planning policy to prevent the waste of that precious resource and prevent also Conservative-controlled Test Valley borough council's disgraceful plan to build on fertile green fields?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will have to write me about the individual instance of that council, but this Government's record is that we wish to build on brownfield not greenfield land.

Q13. [277580] **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet) (Lab): Did my right hon. Friend note the International Monetary Fund report, suggesting that when we entered the global slowdown, public debt in this country was lower than in all our competitor countries, that it is lower now as we leave the recession and that it will be lower in this country over each of the next five years? Is it not the case that the actions of this Government prepared us to deal with the economic slowdown in a way that the Opposition's policies never would have?

The Prime Minister: Once again, my hon. Friend is proving that the problem that we have to deal with is a global financial recession. Britain is coming through that by taking the right policies. The Opposition party is the first party to go into an election tomorrow with no policy to deal with the economy.

Q14. [277581] **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde) (Con): Is the Prime Minister aware that his departing Home Secretary leaves a legacy of 342,000 cases of domestic violence in this country every year? May I ask him to ensure that he re-examines the effectiveness of policies in that area, because of the cost in human misery on the victims and the cost to our caring services?

The Prime Minister: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be fair and acknowledge that the Home Secretary has also led the way on tougher sentences on domestic violence, including in domestic violence courts. This Government, led by the Leader of the House as well as the Home Secretary, have a record in taking on domestic violence by also funding centres for women throughout the rest of the country. That is vital public expenditure, and we believe that it is important for the health of this country. We will continue to support that measure to help women in our country.

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The Prime Minister talked about policies as we go into the European elections tomorrow. Can he confirm that, under the Labour Government, 700,000 companies

work with the European Union, that 3 million jobs relate to the European Union and that 60 per cent. of our trade is with the European Union? Which party goes into the elections tomorrow with the better record?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will also know that EEF, the manufacturers' organisation, has said that the Conservative European policy

"is bound to reduce our influence in Europe".

When the Conservative leader cannot talk to the German Chancellor, the French President or people in Spain and Portugal—*[Interruption.]* The German Chancellor said that she would not offer the hand of friendship to those who opposed the Lisbon treaty. When the right hon. Gentleman can talk politics about his European group only with a Czech forum, which also supports the Lisbon treaty, he is in real trouble.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members leave the Chamber quietly?

BILL PRESENTED

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ACT 2007 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. David Drew, supported by Julia Goldsworthy and Mr. Nick Hurd, presented a Bill to amend the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 to make further provision regarding the consideration of proposals and the representation of parish councils; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 104).

Maximum Wage

Motion for leave to introduce a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.33 pm

Paddy Tipping (Sherwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prescribe the maximum wage that can be paid; and for connected purposes.

In effect, the Bill puts a cap on the maximum wage that can be paid to any person in any one year. Mr. Speaker, you will remember that it is 10 years since the minimum wage was introduced. In April 1999, 2 million people benefited from a minimum wage of £3.60 per hour. Since then, the minimum wage has been increased by 60 per cent. to £5.80 this October. Millions more hard-working families have benefited from that landmark legislation, of which the Labour Government should be really proud.

There was opposition, of course. You will remember, Mr. Speaker, that the CBI and others argued that there would be job losses. That has not been the case. There are still pockets of resistance to the minimum wage, however; I note that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), supported by some of his colleagues, intends to bring forward the Employment Opportunities Bill on 12 June. Let us be in no doubt that that would axe the minimum wage. Instead of going backwards, we now need to go forwards. We need to complete the policy circle and seriously consider the introduction of a maximum wage. In an unprecedented time of economic difficulty, hard-working families and pensioners are facing real problems.

There are genuine concerns about executive pay packages. It simply cannot be right that some chief executives are receiving more than £6 million a year. It cannot be right that Terry Leahy, the chief executive of Tesco, has a salary package of £4.3 million, which is equivalent to the average earnings of 335 of his employees working in Tesco. It is completely wrong that there are directors at Tesco, BP and Vodafone who are each individually receiving a salary of more than £1 million a year, and it cannot be right that some of these people are being paid bonuses for performance targets that they cannot meet. Bonuses should be for success, not for failure. People abhor the golden pension package. What really disturbed people was the £730,000 payment to Sir Fred Goodwin, who should have been sacked rather than rewarded.

Against that background, people want change. When they are asked about wage policy, they say that the gap between the highest paid and the lowest paid is too high. Eighty per cent. of people think that those who are paid the lowest should get more and that those who are paid the highest should get less. They want change; they want to see the introduction of a maximum wage. Outside the Westminster village, away from the political classes, there is a growing demand for openness, fairness and justice, and we should listen and respond to it.

There has been a lot of academic work on the maximum wage, but not much of a political policy focus. However, things are changing. It is significant that in February this year President Obama talked about a maximum wage of $500,000 for executives of companies that have received a state bail-out. It is interesting that UEFA and football clubs across Europe are now talking about maximum wages and transfer fees capped at 51 per cent.

[Paddy Tipping]

of a club's income for their players. Maybe in the not-too-distant future the telephone number figures that professional footballers have been receiving will disappear.

So how would we set a maximum wage? There is a simple solution. We could say to everybody that no one should receive more than the Prime Minister—£194,000 a year. That is not far-fetched. Just look at what is happening in, dare I say, Kazakhstan, where its Prime Minister, Karim Massimov, made such a proclamation earlier this year. The New Economics Foundation, in its paper, "The Alternative Mansion House Speech", advocated a minimum wage capped at £1 million.

However, there are fairer and better ways to do it. If we are sensible, we need to link the minimum wage to the maximum wage. For example, there is a strong case for arguing that the maximum wage should be 10 times the minimum wage. Based on £5.60 an hour, that would give a maximum wage of £120,000. A rule of 100 would provide a maximum of £1.2 million. Another approach would be to link the maximum wage to the average weekly wage, which was £479 last year. Some, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), have argued that the multiple on the average wage should be 20 times, which would produce a maximum wage of £115,000 per year. It is clear that one of the consequences of a maximum wage policy would be that if the top bosses and chief executives wanted to increase their pay, they would have to increase the pay of everyone who worked in the company. That really is progressive politics.

At the end of the day, it does not matter what process is used to calculate the maximum wage. The issue is not one of practice but one of principle. It is right and popular that we should move to a fairer society. If events over the past month have taught us anything, it is that we need to be clear that voters abhor greed and injustice. There is a crisis in the economic system, and a matching crisis in our political system, and reform is necessary and urgent. We need to set out a clear agenda and, what is more, an agenda for action. I am confident that the Bill that I wish to introduce provides a vehicle not just for debate and discussion but for progressive policy, change, justice and fairness.

12.41 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I shall certainly not call a vote, but this has to be one of the daftest ideas that I have heard in this House, and we specialise in them on occasion.

We are an island, but we are not isolated. We are competing in an international field, and many of the people who would be severely damaged by such a Stalinist Government restriction would leave this country, and particularly the City of London and many of its businesses. The damage that that would do to this country would be immeasurable. Going back to a communist-type restriction whereby the Government decide wages and jobs is unthinkable. It would be uncompetitive, and it would destroy us.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Paddy Tipping, Mr. David Drew, Kelvin Hopkins, Judy Mallaber, Mr. Denis MacShane, Albert Owen, Mr. Ken Purchase, John Robertson and David Taylor present the Bill.

Paddy Tipping accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October and to be printed (Bill 103).

Stroke Services

12.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of stroke services.

When the House last debated stroke services in July 2007, we had not introduced the stroke strategy for England. However, it was clear from the content of that debate that Members on both sides of the House were united in their wish to see services across the stroke pathway improved for what is one of the major health conditions, and one that has historically been regarded as a poor relation.

The strategy was launched by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health at the stroke forum conference in Harrogate in December 2007. I know from what he has told me and many other Members that he found the occasion particularly moving, as the strategy was received with great pleasure. Indeed, it has been universally welcomed. The national stroke audit of 2008 by the Royal College of Physicians stated:

"For the first time since we started conducting a national sentinel audit for stroke...ten years ago, there is reason for optimism...If implemented,"

the strategy

"should result in services that are the envy of the world."

Strokes are devastating and the human cost is enormous. Every year, some 110,000 people in England have a stroke—one every five minutes. Some 900,000 people in England live with the consequences of strokes, which are the largest single cause of severe disability in adults. More than 300,000 adults in England have lasting disabilities as a result of a stroke.

Having a stroke has been described as an earthquake in the brain—it certainly is; it is a brain attack. Strokes can have shattering consequences for families and carers as well as the individuals who suffer them. There is also a major economic context to stroke, since the cost to the economy runs into billions of pounds every year.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): The Under-Secretary has referred to the consequences of stroke, including disability. Will she confirm that something of the order of 100,000 stroke victims suffer the consequence of a communication disability? In that context, will she underline the critical role, which needs to be deployed early, of intervention by a speech and language therapist, not least to address eating, drinking and swallowing, and to attempt to ensure that permanent damage to the ability to communicate is not suffered? That is critical, and I welcome the fact that we are debating the subject today.

Ann Keen: The hon. Gentleman has done so much work on the subject, and I know that the House will want to congratulate him on that. He is absolutely correct. I know from my many years of experience as a nurse the consequences for the patient and the family if the assessment is not made correctly. Not having a proper examination of a swallow reflex can lead to very serious consequences for the patient, making recovery so much longer. The issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised is crucial.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that, as well as early intervention, those who suffer aphasia—an extreme form of stroke—need a lot of help over much time? There is always a problem about when that help is cut away. Does she agree that we must be sympathetic and ensure that it is done at the last possible moment, and not too early?

Ann Keen: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. The consequences after such a devastating attack on the brain for a person's ability to lead any sort of normal life are catastrophic. I hope that, as the debate progresses, such issues will be raised and that I can address them.

We are aiming for a revolution in our stroke services. The strategy is a 10-year plan, and we are in only the first year—we have a long way to go. However, I want to outline some improvements that are already happening. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said in the stroke debate in 2007 that he intended to make stroke a top priority for the NHS. We have done that, and that has been recognised in the NHS operating framework for 2009-10, in which stroke services are covered by a tier 1 vital sign—a "must do" for the NHS. Each strategic health authority's vision for the next stage review is committed to improving stroke care.

In addition to the extra funding that has gone to all primary care trusts, we are providing £105 million of central funds over three years from 2008 to 2011 to support implementation of the stroke strategy. Some £77 million is being used to accelerate improvements in acute and community services. Another £16 million is being used for stroke-specific training for nurses, allied health professionals and other staff, as well as additional training for stroke physicians, and £12 million is being used to improve public and professional awareness of the symptoms of stroke and the need to act quickly.

The national awareness campaign—Act FAST—was launched in February. It cannot have failed to catch hon. Members' attention, and many have commented on its success. I am therefore confident that I should not need to remind hon. Members that FAST stands for face, arms, speech and time to call 999, if the person shows any of those signs. The effectiveness of the campaign is now being assessed, but we already know that it has been seen in one medium or another by 92 per cent. of the population.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am very impressed by what the Minister is saying, and I have a deep interest in the issue. She is talking about Act FAST, which is an essential policy if people are to suffer the minimum rather than maximum damage from strokes. However, is she satisfied that people are getting treatment fast, both when symptoms are showing and, sadly, after a stroke has taken place?

Ann Keen: There is more work to be done in particular areas. The reconfiguration of some areas still has to be decided, but the understanding of how essential it is to act fast, go to the appropriate clinical facilities and be seen by physicians with expert training is paramount. The number of lives that have already been saved and, in particular, the number of severe disabilities that have been prevented show the progress that we are making.

Barry Gardiner (Brent, North) (Lab): I welcome everything that my hon. Friend has been saying. On the issue of speed, she will know of the consultation that Healthcare for London has just concluded on the future location of stroke centres in outer London. Does she agree that it is critical that the locations chosen for those centres should have ease of access, so that people can get to them as quickly as possible, and, in the light of that, that Northwick Park hospital, which already serves a growing elderly population and a highly multi-ethnic population, is an ideal candidate for such a centre?

Ann Keen: My hon. Friend raises some interesting points about the recent consultation, which was completed only on 8 May. Announcements will be made in relation to the London strategic health authority on about 20 July, and I know that Northwick Park hospital is held in high esteem for the service that it gives.

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way. She is being very generous indeed with her time. We are all agreed that treatment in a specialist unit is the preferred option. However, some 81 per cent. of all stroke patients are initially admitted to a generic admission unit. We all want that figure to be much lower. Can the Minister therefore give us some indication of the Department's timeline—say, over five to 10 years—for ensuring that more than simply 19 per cent. of people are admitted to a specialist unit, which will of course be far better for them?

Ann Keen: Our strategy is timed to run over a 10-year period. We are well past the first year, and great improvements have been made. As we are speaking, primary care trusts are working, particularly in London, which I am more familiar with, to see how some of those services can be brought forward, particularly through the training and education of staff, because we need expertise in this area. We have made very good progress on cardiac conditions by channelling patients in a particular specialist way, so we know that once we have the evidence to say, "We will save lives and correct disabilities if we do it in a particular way," it will be our duty to speed that up to the best pace that we can.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I rise because there are concerns in my area in north-east London, which are shared, by the way, across the Floor of the House by the hon. Members for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) and for Walthamstow (Mr. Gerrard), who are both with me on this. We believe that the process by which decisions are made on hyper-acute services is not at all transparent or clear. We have tried to press those responsible on whether the process is set in stone. They say that it is, but then they change it. For example, the Royal London hospital received a decision on hyper-acute services on the basis that it had a cardiac centre aligned, yet its scores were no better than those of Whipps Cross hospital. Queen Elizabeth hospital got a decision because of its neurological service, but it has no cardiac service aligned, while others are ruled out on the basis that, somehow, they have neither of those things. It seems that decisions are made on the basis of picking winners, rather than on having a set, transparent form that says, "If you have these things, you are likely to get it and we will adjudicate you accordingly." Will the Minister look at that carefully and ask Richard Sumray and his group how they reach such conclusions? Does she think that they are fair?

Ann Keen: I acknowledge what the right hon. Gentleman has said, particularly in relation to the specific case that he raises. I would be very happy if he would write to me about that, so that I can take it forward, because it is our duty to get things right clinically and in the right area. Everybody is agreed on that. The Royal College of Physicians has congratulated us on how we are managing most of our consultation. However, if there are flaws in it that the right hon. Gentleman wants to raise with me further, I will be happy to look at them.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): My point is not about London. To return to what the Minister said about the rapid response associated with the FAST test, the way in which the ambulance service responds is very important. We know from the original work in Newcastle that ambulance staff are entirely capable of making as good a judgment as GPs can about whether somebody may have had a stroke. However, a recent report in the *Emergency Medicine Journal* showed that the software used by ambulance staff to triage calls was missing up to half of potential strokes, that only one in four stroke patients were given a category A ambulance response and that in a minority of cases—3 per cent.—potential strokes were given category C responses. Is it the Government's view that we should seek to improve those figures and, in particular, to give possible strokes a category A response?

Ann Keen: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that I need to look at. I need to see the figures that he has presented and take the matter up, along with my ministerial colleagues who have responsibility for the ambulance service. I am very happy to do that, because—I cannot say this enough—we have to get it right. All our knowledge to date is saying that we are progressing in that direction. However, if there are problems in some areas that we need to address, which the hon. Gentleman has highlighted, it is my responsibility and the responsibility of my ministerial colleagues to take them seriously and to take them up. Again, I would be very happy if he would like to bring the matter to my attention in a way that I can take up.

Although we can never measure the real achievements of a campaign such as the FAST campaign, it is more than likely that outcomes have already been improved for many people and it is possible that lives have been saved too. The campaign is ongoing, and it is likely to return to television later this year. Many people have phoned and written in to refer to the life that they have saved, having seen the campaign and been made aware, when they were out at social or sporting events. There have even been people who saw the advertisement in our country and, when travelling abroad, were able to notice the symptoms and make people aware, and they have also saved lives.

The stroke strategy mandates the establishment of stroke care networks as a cornerstone of its implementation. Through working co-operatively within a network, services can be better integrated and better planned, and ensure that patients experience seamless transitions across boundaries within and between health and social care.

I feel confident that social care will be raised with me today. The strategy acknowledges that networks are of huge benefit. All stroke services in England now fall within one of 28 networks.

The stroke improvement programme, or SIP as it is sometimes known, provides national support for improving stroke and transient ischaemic attack services, working with stroke networks, front-line services, charities and patient groups. Key areas of SIP's work include providing information and guidance through newsletters, websites and training events, and ensuring that those working to help services improve are in touch and up to date. SIP also runs national improvement projects with 40 front-line stroke and transient ischaemic attack teams, focusing on the main elements of the pathway: acute stroke, TIA, rehabilitation and transfer of care. The projects are putting best care into practice, helping their patients and showing others the way to improve. It is so important in our health service to share best practice.

SIP works with primary care trusts and public health departments to strengthen work on preventing strokes, aiming to prevent the estimated 4,000 strokes caused by the under-recognition and under-treatment of atrial fibrillation. SIP is also bringing together and writing up emerging good practice and providing national forums to bring together key leaders for implementing change. That, too, is an important element in any change in organisations, particularly in the health service. We have to have good leadership to encourage people to look at their practice and to take seriously the consultation involved, so that they understand why it is important and why it must be appropriately led.

The sum of £45 million—about 40 per cent.—of the £105 million of the central funding is going directly to the 152 local authorities with adult social services responsibilities as a ring-fenced grant. This is to encourage and develop good practice in delivering stroke services for adults in their communities, to improve outcomes for those who have had a stroke and to enhance their quality of living and degrees of independence, as well as those of their carers and families.

Local authorities are working hard to develop services according to local needs and priorities—for example, to reflect any special support needs of obviously disadvantaged groups, such as black and minority ethnic groups, those in much lower socio-economic groups, those who might find services difficult to access, and those at higher risk of a recurrent stroke.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): The Minister is right to say that this is an important public health issue, and reducing health inequalities is extremely important. What account has she taken of the rural poor, who are particularly disadvantaged in relation to stroke, given that they are often unable to access stroke services expeditiously?

Ann Keen: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I recall travelling to see patients when I worked as a community district nurse, and I know that many patients feel very isolated when they have no access to transport. If they have no close family to help them, the isolation can be awful. We need to go back to the leadership on this. The third sector does an amazing job in rural areas, but speed, access to services and quality of life can be difficult to achieve in those areas. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman works positively to bring these matters to our attention, and I would be happy to look at whether there is a specific route that we could develop and share best practice on. Many members of the third sector will be able to offer the health service a lot in this regard.

Dr. Murrison: Rather than relying on the third sector, might it not be better to follow the suggestion of the Minister's own emergency group, which is looking into re-allocating resources in the ambulance service, that calls relating to strokes should be upgraded from category B to category A?

Ann Keen: That point has already been raised by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley). We always need to see how we can improve these services, and I take that issue very seriously. Today's debate is about sharing our knowledge and raising problems in our constituencies, and we should use it positively to make improvements.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: Following up on the points that have just been raised about the difficulty that some people have in accessing the services that they need, may I say sincerely to the Minister that elderly people who suffer strokes often need intensive physiotherapy? They will get that physiotherapy in hospital, but when they return to residential care or, in some cases, to a residential nursing home, the availability of that treatment is minimal. Are we going to be able to provide the necessary level of physiotherapy and after-stroke care for those in residential care or in residential nursing homes? I believe that this is a crisis area.

Ann Keen: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern. The reality for some people receiving physiotherapy is that they wait for hospital transport to take them to their treatment, have their therapy for half an hour, then sit and wait all afternoon to be taken back home. I have often questioned the value of that approach. We are now working on transforming community services, following the High Quality Care for All review and Lord Ara Darzi's Next Stage review, to see how long-term conditions can be treated in the home. The reality is that we need to deliver therapy to people where they are, rather than transporting them to it. If we look at this from any perspective, not least the value-for-money perspective, we can see that transporting patients in that way is not how we should be delivering services. Those services should be actively encouraged and delivered where the patient is. Training of staff in residential and nursing homes needs to be improved so that some of that physiotherapy can be given in a more gentle, passive way throughout the day.

John Bercow: Pursuant to the very pertinent question that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) has just asked, is not the distinction in terms of access to the necessary care between those who, by virtue of being in hospital, are—for want of a better term—above the radar and therefore readily visible, and those in a more private environment who fall below the radar and are therefore less visible? Would the Minister care to comment on the need for central leadership, courtesy of the stroke strategy? I sometimes feel that all the parties are poisoned by the dogma of localism to

[John Bercow]

the extent that they do not always recognise that, to protect vulnerable minorities, some sort of central guarantee or leadership has to underpin local initiatives.

Ann Keen: Those points are being addressed through the strategy of caring for people with long-term conditions in the community. Perhaps I can give a plug to my own profession by saying that nurses are leading most of this change. The specialist stroke nurses have always been aware of how the care of the patient could be better delivered. We are aware that, when a stroke has gone badly wrong and disabled someone to a considerable extent, they have often received a Cinderella service. I think that we can all acknowledge that.

Now, however, we are addressing that matter and asking how we can improve the quality of patient care. We need to enable those patients to take small steps towards being able to dress and toilet themselves and to care for their own personal hygiene. It is important that each individual should have the extra care to enable them to do that. These are small steps; this is not high on the scientists' agenda. The hon. Gentleman mentioned things being below the radar. The reality is that even a small improvement in the daily living arrangements that most of us take for granted will make a difference to the patient's life, as will the ability to communicate following the horrendous experience of being unable to do so. At some stage, we are all going to be vulnerable to such an attack, and we must therefore go back to the basic question of how we would want to be treated and what care we would wish to receive. That must be our starting point, which is why the stroke strategy is so important.

I congratulate the all-party group on stroke, which is chaired by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), on its sterling work. Survivors have come to the House and communicated with us about their difficulties. This debate is welcome, and I welcome the practice that has been acknowledged. I know that we will continue to work on this.

I would like to make some progress now. Local authorities are the pivotal access point to a range of services that can benefit people who have had a stroke and who want to live independently at home. They are working with their NHS partners locally, with stroke networks and the voluntary sector to help individuals and carers at an earlier point to reduce the likelihood of increased dependence at a later stage. To support that work, many local authorities have used some of this funding to appoint stroke care co-ordinators.

I want here to acknowledge the good work that the voluntary sector is doing to help implementation of the strategy and to recognise the support it has provided for stroke survivors over many years when stroke was barely ever debated in this House. Volunteers have dedicated their personal time to improving the quality of life for patients and their families. Third sector organisations such as Connect, the Stroke Association, Different Strokes and Speakability provide enhanced services to stroke survivors and their carers. They have much of the expertise and skill required to support further improvements across a broad range of issues.

All those issues are highly relevant to helping people who have had a stroke to achieve a good quality of life, maximum independence, well-being and, of course, choice. Recently, the Stroke Association launched a report, "Getting better: Improving stroke services across the United Kingdom". While recognising that there is more to be done, this report sets out some excellent examples of where significant improvements in stroke services have been made.

The strategy noted that staff working in stroke have variable levels of knowledge and skills and acknowledged that nationally recognised, quality-assured and transferable training and education programmes were needed. Once again, we know from our personal experience and our casework what constituents tell us—that the quality of care varies so much. That is why effective training and education programmes are an essential part of this strategy, and a stroke-specific education framework has been developed to help us achieve that. It is available for comment on the stroke page of the Department of Health's website until 12 June next week. Work to ensure that this framework is used to improve the stroke work force is continuing.

I also need to acknowledge the important work that individual professionals and multidisciplinary teams in the NHS and social care worlds are devoting to making the stroke strategy a reality. There are many examples to cite across all staff groups, but I will cite one example from the latest stroke sentinel audit, which says:

> "Marked improvements have been achieved in the last two years in speed of assessment by therapists after admission. While far from perfect it is clear that a major effort has been made to improve the quality of care being provided nationally."

Multidisciplinary teams are an essential component of world class stroke care and allied health professionals are already taking leadership roles in developing stroke services. I want to congratulate our AHPs. The front line of health services is always the recognisable face of the doctor and the nurse. However, our AHPs are providing a tremendous service to patients in all clinical categories. Given that we are discussing stroke today, I would particularly mention the importance of the work they do once the diagnosis has been made, the CT scan provided and the appropriate drugs administered. It is the after-care of the experts that then becomes so important, and teams of allied health professionals achieve so much in that respect. We have supported regional AHP leadership challenges, which will culminate in a national final in June to encourage more of them to do so.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said in his foreword to the strategy:

> "Collectively, these markers set out an ambitious agenda to deliver world class stroke services, from prevention right through to life long support."

Work has begun to make this vision a reality and it will continue. I know that all hon. Members will continue to work to hold us to account on this strategy; we will work together to continue to improve stroke services for the people of our country.

1.14 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): First, may I welcome the debate and the opportunity it provides to consider the development of stroke services? It comes at an opportune moment, because, as the Minister said, it is approaching two years since we last had a debate whose purpose was to identify what needed

to be done. At that point, the Government had just published their document, "A New Ambition for Stroke", but that was already more than a year and half after the National Audit Office had published its groundbreaking study of the delivery of stroke services. I remind the House of the work done by the NAO and by the Public Accounts Committee and I welcome the fact that the NAO is in the process of reviewing its report and the progress made on the strategy. That will be immensely helpful.

Our debate is also timely in the sense that, two years ago, we looked at the outcome of the 2006 national sentinel stroke audit, and now we are able to consider the results of the 2008 national sentinel stroke audit, which was published in April this year. This is a timely opportunity to look at the progress made. I am pleased to note from the 2008 audit that an improvement has been recorded in all the standards in respect of the hospital care of stroke patients in England. That illustrates the amount of work done by the Department of Health, health services and hospitals across the country after the findings of the original NAO report.

The Minister kindly expressed gratitude for the work done by the all-party group. As chair of that group, I would like to thank the Department for its unstinting support and I also thank hon. Members across the House for their participation. It is excellent that we have been able to work together to create an environment for the improvement of stroke care.

As I have said before, I wish it were not necessary for the Department of Health to publish a national stroke strategy in order for hospitals across the country to identify on the basis of clear research evidence the best available treatment for stroke patients. As we will discuss in the debate, we unfortunately remain in a health service where the central structure of guidance and incentivisation has had a big impact on the extent to which hospital and community services are reconfigured. I promise my hon. Friends that I will touch on how the reconfiguration has worked out in London, for example.

The Minister did not tell us in detail what the national sentinel audit said about the improvements, so I shall take a little time to put some of the key results on the record. First, as I have already said, the improvements recorded on all the set standards have taken the cumulative score in England up to 73 per cent.—a considerable improvement on 2006. Only a small number of hospitals have failed to improve. I do not want to diminish in any way the progress that has been made, but it is important for us constantly to look at the gaps between where we are and where we ought to be. For example, 25 per cent. of patients do not get access to a multidisciplinary stroke unit, yet the incontrovertible evidence is that such access gives patients better outcomes. We want to get increasingly close to 100 per cent. on these figures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) made an important point about the need to question why only 17 per cent. of patients reach a stroke unit within four hours. If patients have been admitted to an emergency department first, it is clearly not in their best interests to be sent to a medical admissions unit before being sent to an acute stroke unit. I recently visited Peterborough hospital, which has structured its services so that patients brought in in an ambulance are directly admitted to a stroke unit, bypassing the emergency department. I do not know whether that is the right approach given that many emergency departments are perfectly capable of dealing with stroke patients in the first place and ensuring that they get an immediate CT scan. However, I cannot see the benefit of patients being transferred to a medical admissions unit, and then being transferred to a stroke unit. It is not in the best interests of patients to be moved from one place to another within a hospital. Given that probably about 60 per cent. of stroke patients are admitted to a hospital on the same day as suffering the stroke, a much higher proportion should be sent to a stroke unit directly.

The Minister spoke about the FAST test. The national sentinel stroke audit suggests that in 2008 only about a quarter of patients in total, in the sample, were subject to a FAST test by paramedics. That procedure needs to be embraced, not least because we have rightly told the public about the necessity of identifying the symptoms of stroke and treating such patients as a medical emergency. The last thing that should happen is that the public and patients do not see precisely those criteria being applied by ambulance services, by out-of-hours services—in whose protocols there is often a gap in terms of categorisation of stroke—and when patients are subsequently admitted to a hospital.

That brings me to the point about immediate scanning. The evidence is clear that it is in stroke patients' best interests to receive a CT scan rapidly. In response to the audit, the Royal College of Physicians said that all patients admitted to hospital with a stroke or potential stroke should be scanned within 24 hours. As the Minister will know, in the absence of a CT scan, it is difficult to ascertain what kind of treatment a patient should receive. At a basic level, a stroke might be either ischaemic, resulting, for example, from a clot travelling to the brain, or haemorrhagic, from a bleed in the brain. As clinicians will make clear, unless one knows which type of stroke is involved as a result of a definitive scan, it is difficult to provide the appropriate treatment. As a proxy for providing good treatment, early CT scanning is integral.

The audit suggests that only 64 per cent. of such patients were being scanned within 24 hours. Almost by definition, a large number of the rest were not able to get appropriate treatment as rapidly as they should have. Only 21 per cent. were being scanned within three hours—we would not expect that to be possible for 100 per cent., not least because for many patients admitted it would be clear that their stroke occurred more than three hours before, so the option of thrombolysis probably would not be available. In 2008, barely 1 per cent. of stroke patients—and fewer than 10 per cent. of those for whom it would be appropriate—were being thrombolysed. That is a long way from where we need to be. Even four or five years ago, countries such as Australia were approaching 15 per cent. of total stroke patients being thrombolysed, which is nearly the optimum level. Therefore, although we are making progress, we have further to go.

The national sentinel audit looks at nine indicators, which are intended to represent a bundle of care that, if provided to patients, will be indicative of good quality. Thrombolysis is not included, because it is appropriate only for a minority of patients. However, many of the items mentioned by my hon. Friends are included: for instance, the swallow assessment, to which my hon.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) referred. Interestingly, only 17 per cent. of patients surveyed in the national sentinel audit received all nine indicators of care. There is significant variation. For example, 69 hospitals achieved all nine indicators of care—the full care bundle—for fewer than 5 per cent. of their patients; in contrast, three hospitals achieved more than 70 per cent. As the audit points out, there is a big gap between those three hospitals and most of the others, which are bunching around 40 to 50 per cent. The three hospitals concerned are King's College hospital, the Royal Free and Chelsea and Westminster.

That takes me on to London and the structure of its services. Undoubtedly, there is discussion to be had about where patients should be admitted for hyper-acute stroke care, immediate CT scanning, possible thrombolysis and so on. If we reform stroke services, we want that to be readily available. However, the approach differs across the country. As far as I can tell, NHS London's approach was to ask an expert panel to assess the quality of care in a large number of hospitals across London, to establish whether they were capable of providing good-quality care: in effect, whether they should be commissioned for hyper-acute stroke care. Having spoken to someone on the expert panel, I know that it reached views on that, but then NHS London said that eight hospitals would be designated as hyper-acute centres. For the life of me, I cannot find out why the answer was eight.

Mr. Duncan Smith: That is exactly the point. In north-east London, we have puzzled over the matter. A reason for one to be made a hyper-acute centre is neurological services, but the Royal London hospital does not have that; it has cardiac services. It is almost as if NHS London sat down and decided which hospitals it wanted before the panel was brought into session and made its decisions. It is without any logic, as Whipps Cross—our hospital—actually has stroke services. It is absurd.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for those interesting observations. I have had conversations with Sir Richard Sykes, chair of NHS London, and correspondence with Ruth Carnell, chief executive of NHS London. I urge NHS London to reconsider whether eight hyper-acute centres in London is the right answer. My view is that there is no evidence to suggest that substantial demand for throughput is necessary before it is possible to sustain a service. For example, the East of England strategic health authority has said that as long as a hospital is likely to be able to offer thrombolysis twice a month on average, there is no reason why it cannot sustain the service. From the commissioner's point of view, London should have as many hospitals offering the service as are willing to offer it. On that basis, they should be commissioned to provide it, as long as they maintain the necessary quality of care.

Mr. Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is being generous in giving way, and I appreciate it. As he will know, one of the big issues in London is traffic. In relation to the eight centres, the calculations are completely ludicrous. Today, it took me an hour to travel from my house in Chingford to the Royal London hospital. NHS London calculates that the journey takes less than half an hour. For local people, the decision to have eight centres is absurd.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There are several geographical curiosities. Clearly, NHS London's intention was to have a geographical spread for the eight centres. For example, in north-east London, Queen's hospital at Romford was identified for that purpose. If we look at the distribution of stroke patients in NHS London's own document, however, we see that in north London, Enfield and Barnet have large numbers of elderly stroke patients, and there is nothing there at all. Barnet hospital is a potential location, but it is fanciful of NHS London to say that either Northwick Park or Barnet would be an option, because if one shifts to Barnet, a significant part of north-west London is left without a near facility.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: Let me finish my point about London, and then I will gladly give way.

In my view, a greater number of hospitals should be allowed to provide the service, if it is viable and the quality is maintained. Let me illustrate that point with reference to the two hospitals I mentioned. According to the national sentinel audit, Chelsea and Westminster is among the hospitals with the best quality of stroke care, but it is not one of those chosen by NHS London to offer hyper-acute care. The Royal Free, which is among the hospitals with the best standards of stroke care, is also not one of those recommended by NHS London to offer the service. Guy's and Tommy's is another example. As I am sure the Minister knows, the consultant stroke physician Tony Rudd has been an instrumental figure in the improvement of stroke care, and has worked as co-ordinator for the central audit. His hospital has been left out on, as far as I can see, purely geographical grounds. An arbitrary decision has been made about the number of hyper-acute stroke units that should be made available to a greater number of people.

Stephen Pound (Ealing, North) (Lab): Before the hon. Gentleman commits Northwick Park to take on the whole of Barnet, let me point out that in Ealing we have been told that the only hyper-acute unit that we can access will be either Charing Cross or that very same Northwick Park. We have also been told that the modelling is robust when it comes to analysing transport times. May I tell the hon. Gentleman something which I suspect he already knows, and which my hon. Friend the Minister certainly knows? Travelling from Ealing hospital to Northwick Park or Charing Cross is not an experience that one would wish on anyone except at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Lansley: This is what seems to me to have happened. In London there has been a successful first move to primary angioplasty in cardiac centres. The provision of that service requires a significant level of throughput to the cardiologist whose job is to undertake primary angioplasty. There are nine centres in London. There is therefore a trade-off between the necessary level of throughput and access. It is not possible for a large

number of emergency departments or hospitals to offer primary angioplasty, because there would not be enough cardiologists, catheter laboratories and the like.

I do not think NHS London realises that it can take a completely different approach to thrombolysis for stroke. I believe that, given that most full-service accident and emergency departments have a protocol providing for immediate access to the next available CT scan and given that CT scanning is available at whatever time of day might be involved, they should be capable of offering a hyper-acute service.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the arbitrary nature of the proposed number of acute units, and I hope that that will be reconsidered. Has not another issue been overlooked? The millions of people who come into central London during the day, including tourists, will also be affected by the proposed arrangement. It seems even more arbitrary that Guy's and St Thomas', which is in the heart of central London and has one of the best units in the country, may be left out.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Lady will know from what I have said that I entirely agree with her.

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): The position is actually worse than the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Stephen Pound) have said. It is true that the Ealing stroke unit is closing and that Charing Cross will then be the nearest unit, but in two years' time it will move to St Mary's, which will make travelling even more inconvenient and will place the unit in a less appropriate location.

Mr. Lansley: Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Stephen Pound) have mentioned Charing Cross, which is also relevant to the way in which stroke services can be organised for thrombolysis. If CT scanning is available, there is no need for a radiologist on site to provide the necessary diagnosis. I have visited Charing Cross and seen a bank of radiologists providing a 24/7 service. Digital transfer of imaging means that there is no reason why images cannot be sent across London, or indeed across Britain, to a team of radiologists who can provide the diagnosis that is necessary for someone to decide whether thrombolysis is appropriate. I am told that the application of thrombolysis itself is not the most difficult part. The part that must be got right is the speedy interpretation of a CT scan so that the nature of the stroke can be determined.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman referred to the question of the Royal Free. Because I was concerned about it as well, I asked the Royal Free about it, and was told that it had accepted the proposals. It said that it had

"considered...the preferred solution...in the consultation document... that the trust should work collaboratively with UCLH to provide a combined offer which has the potential to deliver a truly world class service. Having taken the advice of its clinical community it now endorses the UCLP proposals which would see a combined comprehensive service with one hyper-acute stroke unit... based at UCLH."

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman will recall that I visited the Royal Free about seven weeks ago and had a conversation there. I shall rest on my view that as it provides one of the highest-quality stroke services in the country, there is absolutely no reason why it should not continue to offer a hyper-acute stroke service through its emergency department. That is entirely a matter for the Royal Free. If it does not want to do it, that is fine. I merely say that the commissioners should encourage it to do it, because it will be better located for the purpose in relation to the population of north London if, for example, Barnet and Chase Farm choose not to offer the service.

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): May I take up the hon. Gentleman's point about provision across the country? The last few Members who have intervened have referred exclusively to London issues, but I suspect that the hon. Gentleman will be the first to accept that the inconsistency of provision and the time that it takes to travel to hospitals to access this specific form of care are crucial in all parts of the country. In my area of Greater Manchester and my constituency of Cheadle we have local hospitals, but we face the same issues of access. We know from the Royal College of Physicians just how many more lives could be saved if travel times were shorter and access more readily available. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have a long way to go before we can be content with the consistency of access arrangements across the country?

Mr. Lansley: I do agree, and I think that significant variation is one of the issues on which we should focus. As the hon. Gentleman will know, Manchester has set about the task of reconfiguring its hyper-acute stroke services at a much earlier stage than other areas. I think that it, too, is beginning to realise that it may have unduly restricted the number of centres that should offer such services. There was an attempt to focus the whole of Manchester on Salford Royal hospital. I hope that it will be established that, as time goes on, other hospitals can and should provide those services.

There is, however, a risk. The Manchester proposals were based on the proposition that patients going to Salford Royal for hyper-acute care would be there for no more than a day or two, and would then be immediately transferred to their local stroke units for the remainder of their acute stroke care. That returns me to the issue of incentivisation. Such an arrangement is fine in circumstances in which, through the tariff, there is a clear distinction between the cost of the hyper-acute service and the cost of the other acute services. We fought a battle for a long time and secured, in the latest version of the tariff, the ability to "unbundle" it into the acute care and rehabilitation phases. If we are to support hyper-acute services, it is equally important for us to unbundle the tariff in order to separate hyper-acute services, including thrombolysis, from other forms of acute care, including care provided for patients for whom thrombolysis is not appropriate. That is not happening at present, and it needs to happen. I urge the Minister to bear in mind that it is important for the stroke team to get it right.

Before I leave the issue of variation, let me say that it remains a matter of considerable disappointment that stroke services in Wales appear to be consistently poorer than those in England or Northern Ireland. Scotland is not included in the central audit. As I said earlier, the

[Mr. Lansley]

figure for England has risen to 73 per cent., while the Welsh figure is 58 per cent., which is poorer than the figure in the 2006 audit. The rate of improvement in Wales over those two years has been lower than that in England.

One glimmer of hope in Wales is the pace at which physiotherapy services have improved. Members of the Welsh Assembly clearly wish to make progress. Speaking from over the border, as it were, I hope that Welsh Members—none of whom are immediately available—will receive the message, and, given that this is a devolved matter, will speak to their Welsh Assembly colleagues about it as a matter of urgency.

I do not want to go on too long because other Members want to speak. I will just make one or two more points. It is important that we continue to ensure that the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines on stroke care keep pace, as it were, with what the central audit is telling us and what the Royal College of Physicians guidelines tell us about the best available treatment. If we are going to mainstream the national stroke strategy throughout the NHS, we must ensure that NICE guidelines clearly set out what is the most cost-effective treatment and the most clinically effective treatment—often with stroke, those two things turn out to be the same—and that commissioners take responsibility.

It is also clear that most primary care trusts across the country have been commissioning stroke services on the basis of cost and volume and not taking sufficient account of quality. We need to think creatively about how to develop the tariff, not only unbundling it in the way I described, but applying it to the whole care bundle, so that the PCTs or other commissioners are able to ensure that they are clear that they are contracting for a standard of service, with quality indicators built into the services that they buy.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: My hon. Friend has mentioned primary health care. Where does he think general practitioners lie in this matter and in the stroke services strategy? Often, symptoms of a potential stroke display themselves over a period of time, before a stroke occurs. What is the role of GPs? Are they linking with other professionals to deal with it? Perhaps medication can be prescribed, which has not been mentioned so far in the debate, to prevent a stroke from taking place. That can often be in the hands of a GP.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He makes a good point. It is probably fair to say that, while quite a lot of GPs have taken a close interest in the development of stroke services over the past four or five years, others are still tending to cling to the view that, broadly speaking, people have strokes and the resultant level of disability is not likely to be much influenced by the speed of or access to treatment. However, we now know that speed and access to treatment can make a big difference. That is certainly true, especially for transient ischaemic attacks. The likelihood of someone who has had a TIA having a major stroke in the next four weeks is about 20 per cent. Often it is GPs who are aware that someone has had a TIA. Therefore, it is important for them to ensure that people then get access through the TIA clinic to proper treatment, including anti-coagulation.

Likewise, it is important that there is a seamless pathway of care. As my hon. Friend will know, we believe strongly that GPs should be much more instrumental in commissioning the care, given that they are aware of its quality. By virtue of that, they should be responsible for the subsequent delivery of rehabilitation and support in the community. Too many stroke patients who have been to see us at the all-party group feel that when they return to the community after hospital treatment it is as though they have fallen off a cliff edge. Services need to be joined up. There are various way we can do that, but the role played by GPs would be a big help.

Ann Keen: Would the hon. Gentleman therefore congratulate the Government on introducing the NHS health check programme, which started in April? As hon. Members have pointed out, it is about prevention. The programme has the potential to prevent, on average, over 1,500 heart attacks and strokes and to save at least 650 lives a year. I am sure that he would like to welcome that.

Mr. Lansley: Yes, I was about to discuss prevention. I am sure that the vascular risk assessment will provide a significant benefit in identifying people for whom there is scope for prevention. It would be helpful, when the Minister speaks about the number of lives that will be saved if the Department had responded to my requests for the supporting data to be published to justify those figures. I am sure that, now that she has mentioned them in the House, all the data to support those figures will be published.

There is still a job to be done in understanding, if people access vascular risk assessments, what the appropriate follow-up will be. We must be sure that we do not have a lot of people who become "worried well". They may need an improved diet or physical activity—hopefully, they will not need medication to which they do not have access. We must ensure that the necessary resources to support primary prevention are put in place.

On prevention, an NOP poll from October last year showed that nearly one in five of the public still had no knowledge of the causes of stroke. It is important that we address that. There is good evidence to study. The World Health Organisation Monica—multinational monitoring of determinants and trends in cardiovascular disease—study published in *The Lancet Neurology* in 2005 made it clear that if we are going to improve stroke care

"socioeconomic factors seem more important than classic risk factors for the establishment of stroke trends in the population"

Therefore, the argument that we have often discussed here about the reduction of inequalities involves not just health inequalities in isolation—classic socio-economic determinants of health are important in determining the level of stroke mortality.

It is also important, and we can now see the benefit coming through, to note that one of the lessons of that study was that the

"quality of stroke care makes a profound difference, not only to the patient and his or her family but also to the burden of stroke in the population at large."

What does that mean? I think that it means that by educating people in the NHS and beyond about the causes of stroke, its symptoms, the necessity to treat it as a medical emergency and the possibility of being able to impact positively on it through treatment, we are making people more aware of the risk, the disability, the mortality associated with stroke and the fact that they can do something about it. That will, I hope, make a big difference to stroke mortality.

We need to improve outcomes. It is not that we spend less on stroke; we spend a lot on it. However, for too long too much of what we have spent has been expenditure as a consequence of the disability that results from strokes. Too little has been spent to ensure that we prevent stroke and that where stroke occurs we access treatment rapidly.

There are still significant disparities between treatment in this country and in others. There is still more we can do. It is not just about thrombolysis. It is also about early supported discharge. Only about a third of patients get access to early supported discharge after a stroke. We need that figure to rise. There is a continuing agenda, which we will continue to support and press for to improve stroke services and make their quality more consistent across the country. I hope that through prevention and awareness of stroke, stroke outcomes will further improve in the years ahead.

1.48 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley) (Lab): I am delighted to be able to take part in the debate. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) talk about how we can prevent stroke and the devastation that it brings. I do not think there can be a family in the UK who has not been affected by stroke in one way or another and does not understand how difficult it is to live with the consequences.

My hon. Friend the Minister will understand if I start by talking about how we used to treat people with stroke and how we treat them nowadays. Stroke is one of the key indicators of how the NHS has transformed the way it deals with such devastating conditions. I am sure she remembers what we did when someone was admitted to the ward and we knew that they were suffering from stroke or some cerebral vascular accident. We made them comfortable in the ward and they stayed with us for several weeks. We put their affected arm on a cushion, walked them up and down the ward sometimes and hoped that all went well when they went home. How different it is today, thank goodness.

It was interesting to listen to the debate about the London reconfiguration of services. There was a time when we would not have even discussed where a stroke patient was admitted. In fact, for a while I was very concerned that we were considering the effects of a cardiac incident in much more detail and much more forcefully than we were ever thinking about the effects of stroke. We should therefore be congratulated on having this debate and on how we now address stroke.

My hon. Friend the Minister clearly set out the effects of stroke, and how frequently people are affected by it. In the UK, it kills someone every five minutes. When we cite the figures, it can sometimes be difficult to understand how devastating stroke can be. Eighty per cent. of strokes are caused by the clot—the one that could respond to thrombylisis. That is why it is so vital that people with stroke are treated immediately. I hope that in my brief contribution I shall be able to offer some examples of how we can address stroke and reduce the incidence of it, and make sure that the unfortunate people who suffer a stroke can have better treatment.

Crawley has a very diverse population, and 14 per cent. of people there come from black and minority ethnic groups. We do not know why—there is not the research for us to understand it—but such groups, and particularly Afro-Caribbean people, are disproportionately affected by stroke. I was therefore delighted when the South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Trust decided to focus on three areas in Surrey, Sussex and Kent with a particularly high proportion of people having to dial 999 because of a stroke, and Crawley was one of those areas. The trust decided to think about the strategy for dealing with that, and to look at not only responding quickly and getting people into an appropriate unit swiftly, but what role the ambulance service could play in reducing stroke. That is why I am delighted to be able to talk about the work that that service has done.

We have debates about the reconfiguration of such services, and some of us—most of us, I think—have been through some very difficult and uncomfortable times, but stroke services illustrate why we have to make sure that these devastating events are dealt with in the best possible unit. Paul Sutton, chief executive of SECAmb, has always said that the problem is not to do with getting people who have experienced an event such as a stroke into the nearest front door, but with getting them into the right front door—that of an emergency centre that will be able to treat them properly. When our ambulance services arrive at a site, they often do not pick people up immediately and rush them to the closest institution. I know that people sometimes feel that they should do that, but time is taken to examine the patient and to understand what is going on. Often, the ambulance will stay at the home for some time, while staff take advice about how best to treat that patient and where best to take them. Stroke is one of those conditions that serve to illustrate why we have to make sure that patients go to the right place.

SECAmb has chosen Crawley as one of the areas on which to focus, and it will soon have on its streets ambulances with wraparound advertising for the FAST campaign. I do not think there is a single Member who will not accept that that has been the most amazing campaign. I pay tribute to the actors who took part in it—I genuinely hope they are actors—as I think they did an extraordinary job in taking viewers through the process of understanding what a stroke can look like. Their work has had a tremendous effect. Our ambulances will have all that advertising on their sides.

One of our stroke leads in SECAmb is David Davis. He is an amazing gentleman from Crawley. *[Interruption.]* No, he is not the Member who has just been referred to from a sedentary position; this David Davis is much better. He is taking a fantastic lead in getting out into the communities that most need to understand the causes of stroke. He will therefore be found in the gurdwara, in temples and in mosques, helping people understand about stroke. If I can make one plea to the Minister it is that I want David to do more of this work. I want him to be out there preventing stroke, but he has

[Laura Moffatt]

to do his other job as well, of course, and it is difficult for a busy ambulance service to be able to free up him up along with the colleagues who help with this work. I want to make sure not only that our ambulance service staff are visible out in our communities doing that fantastic work, but that we have enough paramedics and paramedic technicians to back them up and support them. I want that work to continue because I believe it is having a considerable effect in helping to reduce the number of strokes in our communities. We need to make sure that much more of that preventive work takes place.

Mark Hunter: The FAST campaign has featured in the contributions of several hon. Members, and it has, of coufse, been a great success, but I understand that the funding that supports it is in place for only three years. Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a danger that some of this excellent work could be undone if there is not a longer-term commitment to funding it beyond the current three-year period?

Laura Moffatt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I believe that the health services move so quickly that in three years' time we will have moved on to new campaigns. I certainly hope the FAST campaign becomes part and parcel of our understanding as citizens of what can happen to people. I see it very much in the same terms as the seat belt campaign in that there is an initial start-up process, but the point then becomes embedded in our psyche and in our understanding of how we address things. I am fairly certain that there will come a time when we do not need a stroke campaign, but that we will then have to focus on other causes.

We have talked about the need for a quick and adequate response for those with stroke, and it will be a disappointment to all Members if that falls short of the excellent stroke strategy requirements for treatment. I do not think any of us would shy away from being a critical friend of the NHS if that were necessary, and from trying to make the situation right if it had gone wrong. All of us would happily highlight these campaigns in order to make sure that all our constituents got the service they deserved if they were affected by stroke.

I believe the stroke strategy has given focus to the whole stroke campaign and an understanding of where we are going with it. Interestingly, in a recent review of health services in the north of West Sussex, stroke was one of the principal issues that was addressed to try to strengthen our services. Crawley hospital has an amazing stroke unit; people come to it quickly after their initial treatment and there is a great sense of camaraderie. The staff are tremendously well motivated and qualified to deal with stroke.

The Minister will completely understand my second plea to her, as she is a former nurse, and once a nurse, always a nurse. Stroke mainly affects people who are over 55, and more commonly over 65, and the treatment of it should be a well-respected specialism that takes its rightful place alongside all other emergency care. Those who deal with stroke should be well regarded by those within the wider profession and be regarded from outside the profession as engaged in a field that contributes enormously to well-being. It is not a second-class field. Those in the nursing profession used to say, "Oh well, I'm going to go and look after older people." That should be seen as up there with the most interesting of services. By making sure there is such high regard, we will be able to ensure that the service continues to improve and attracts the very best quality nurses.

To make sure that that happens, we must ensure that the professionals in our communities come together. In February, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State launched a well-being programme in Crawley, dedicated to ensuring that people are exercising, that they are dealing with issues such as hypertension, which of course is associated with one of the highest predispositions to stroke, that such conditions are being properly monitored and that diet is being addressed. We also know that those who are obese have a predisposition to stroke. This is about tackling all those issues at a very basic level within our primary care services and about our emergency services coming together to ensure that people are less affected by this horrible condition.

When somebody has a stroke and receives the initial treatment—we hope that goes well and that the damage to the brain is reduced—we must ensure not only that they get the care in hospital that they desperately need but that it continues. Local authorities have a huge role to play in ensuring that timely adaptions are done at home, but co-ordination can sometimes be a difficult issue for local authorities to face. They need to ensure that when people are at home—be it in their own private home or in local authority or social housing—and needing to stay mobile, because that is crucial following a stroke, the adaptions are done in a timely fashion so that life is at least decent for them.

We want to ensure that throughout the service, from the first moment that horrible event happens to when people start to make progress through speech therapy and physiotherapy, things are as good as they possibly can be. The way we can properly tackle this is by ensuring that more research is done. The Stroke Association is a great advocate of ensuring not only that the research is done but that people are treated properly, and it does excellent research in all sorts of areas. The Minister may be interested to learn that because of the work being done in Crawley, the Stroke Association gave SECAmb a beacon of good practice award. That is something of which we can be justly proud in our area.

That is not to say that we are going to rest on our laurels, because we must continue to fight for better services for people who have a stroke. We must make sure that the emergency care is as it should be; we must continue to do much more preventive work; we must ensure that everybody within the professions is up to speed, and that includes GPs, nurses and practitioners throughout the national health service and beyond; we must improve the co-ordination of services when people return home, to ensure that adaptions are done in a timely fashion; and we must support the excellent voluntary groups, which make life better for those who have had a stroke, allowing them to come together with others to share experiences and to laugh and cry together over what can be a devastating event for a family. That is so important, and those groups are such a crucial element to all the work, as the Minister has said. In that way, we can genuinely ensure that people who suffer a stroke in

the United Kingdom—and in England and Wales in particular—will have the best possible outcome following what can be the most appalling thing that can happen.

Stephen Pound: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not only for the knowledge and expertise that she brings to this subject but for her personal commitment to it. Does she agree that if we are seeing a move from the widely established stroke units to hyper-acute stroke units for our thrombolytic treatment, there is a problem when it comes to repatriating the patients from the hyper-acute unit to their home without the intervening phase of the ordinary stroke unit? Does she agree that an essential component of precisely the process to which she referred is that the patient move from the hyper-acute unit to a stroke unit and then home?

Laura Moffatt: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because he precisely illustrates the difficulty. Stroke is such an interesting condition because it involves the immediate and pressing nature of trying to reduce the effect and then the very long and ongoing rehabilitation that needs to take place. My opinion is that intermediate stroke units have an enormous role to play; I have seen them working well in my constituency and I have no reason to believe they would not be right for the rest of the UK, particularly London, which I know he is very concerned about.

I hope that we feel passionate about stroke, because we should do. It affects so many families and we have made enormous strides in tackling it over the years. I am very proud to be able to visit the units and see how people are treated—I can certainly say that about Crawley. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to say a few words about the work of SECAmb, because I believe it to be a gold-star service.

2.5 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): I, too, warmly welcome this important and timely debate, and pay tribute to Members on both sides of the House for their contributions and to the all-party group, which has done so much to push this important area of health care and health policy up the agenda. As stroke is the third biggest killer in this country, after heart disease and cancer, and the leading cause of adult disability, it must remain an absolute priority for the NHS.

The Minister has mentioned the cost of stroke care to the NHS. The relevant figure is £2.8 billion, and the individuals involved—those unfortunate people who have suffered a stroke—take up more than a fifth of all hospital beds in the country. This issue has an economic cost, as well as a real and tragic human one. Some 45 per cent. of those who suffer a stroke die from it, not to mention the fact that stroke causes the many levels of disability that other hon. Members have mentioned.

We all acknowledge that in the past stroke care did not get the attention or the funding that it deserved, given those stark statistics. Until a few years ago this country had one of the worst stroke care regimes in western Europe, but things have turned a corner and improved since the publication of the national stroke strategy in December 2007, which was warmly welcomed in all parts of the House. It is encouraging to see the impact that the strategy has already had and the improvements made since that very important milestone.

It is also important that stroke was established as a "national priority" in the NHS operating framework of 2008-09, which obliges primary care trusts to set out their plans to improve stroke services. I emphasise to the Minister that although that welcome strategy is in place, we need to monitor things at the PCT level to ensure that improvements are happening on the ground. It is also important to stress that although the strategy is extremely welcome, the Minister must acknowledge that there are issues to address in respect of not having set time scales for some of the improvements within the 10-year period. Perhaps we need more milestones to aim for in order to see how the strategy is being implemented. It is excellent that we are talking about this nearly two years after the strategy was introduced, but it would be encouraging to say exactly where we are aiming to make tangible improvements in stroke care over the course of the 10-year period. I also welcome the Government's announcement of their intention to commission an independent evaluation of the strategy and its implementation—that is enormously important, because we all need to follow its progress. Will the Minister let the House know when those results will be made public and when that process will be complete?

Several matters relate to the strategy and to stroke care in general. The first, as has been mentioned, is the great need for awareness of the symptoms of stroke and the need for proper referral from that point. Data from October 2008 show that 18 per cent. of public respondents had no knowledge at all of the symptoms of stroke. Rather more alarmingly, a 2005 National Audit Office report showed that only just over half of GPs would immediately refer someone with suspected stroke for the emergency care that is so crucial to the outcome for stroke patients from that initial point.

I want to echo comments made by other hon. Members about the Act FAST campaign, which we all agree has been enormously powerful in demonstrating the situation visibly and in an easy to understand way.

Mark Hunter: As my hon. Friend has said, the Act FAST campaign has been acknowledged by Members on both sides of the House. One of the direct consequences of the success of the campaign is that the number of calls to the Stroke Association's helpline has increased by some 36 per cent. The association says—this is perhaps an indication that it is struggling to meet demand—that it estimates a 200 per cent. increase in the number of calls that have been abandoned while people were waiting to get through. It might be said that that is a consequence of the success of the campaign, but there is a real issue about support for the Stroke Association. I invite my hon. Friend to agree with me, and I hope that when the Minister responds later she will discuss what further support the Government can give the Stroke Association.

Greg Mulholland: I thank my hon. Friend for that valuable and important contribution, which addresses a point that I was about to make. I echo his comments in asking the Minister, in light of the extra volume of calls, what additional help hospitals and voluntary organisations are being and will be given, so that they can cope with the very welcome additional strain that has resulted from the success of the campaign. That is an important area for the Minister to concentrate on.

[Greg Mulholland]

Do the Government intend to do any quantitative analysis of the success of the campaign? I think that it would be very insightful. As has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), have they considered the impact on particularly high-risk groups, such as those in certain black and minority ethnic communities—in particular those from south Asian or Afro-Caribbean communities? If the Minister can give us some indication of how the Government plan to target those particularly at-risk groups, that would be very useful.

Let me turn to prevention. Hon. Members have already said that that is absolutely crucial. When we consider that 20,000 strokes a year could be avoided through preventive work on high blood pressure, irregular heart beats, smoking cessation and the wider use of statins, we see that prevention is an absolute priority in dealing with strokes. Again, if we consider the economic impact, preventing just 2 per cent. of strokes in England would save £37 million of care costs. That is a matter that needs even higher priority in the strategy.

I welcome the NHS health check programme. It can highlight those most at danger from stroke, as well as those at danger from other conditions. How many people have been invited to these health checks, and are the most at-risk groups—the most susceptible groups—being invited? That is crucial, if the checks are to have the kind of impact that we all hope that they will in reducing the number of strokes that happen in the country.

On treatment, as has already been mentioned the most crucial thing for stroke patients is to arrive swiftly at a stroke unit. The concerns that suspected stroke patients are not being prioritised sufficiently within the ambulance service are very real. In terms of the provision of CT scans and thrombolysis, the importance of specialist stroke units cannot be overstated. The Stroke Association has described stroke units as

"the single most beneficial intervention that can be provided after stroke".

As other hon. Members have said, however, there are disparities in care between those who are admitted immediately to stroke units and those who spend time on general wards or in accident and emergency departments. The simple fact, borne out by the figures, is that patients who are admitted to stroke units quickly are more likely to survive and to make a better recovery. Again, we should consider the costs, the impact on patients and the length of time involved; such patients will spend less time in hospital than their general ward counterparts, who have a 14 to 25 per cent. higher mortality rate.

The 2008 Royal College of Physicians audit shows that there has been a huge increase in the number of hospitals that have protocols for ambulance service emergency transfer of patients to stroke units from 4 per cent. in 2004 to 49 per cent. in 2008. That is extremely welcome, but, as we have already heard, it is not happening up and down the country. I make reference to the particular concerns in London and echo the concerns about the somewhat arbitrary natures of the decisions that appear to be being taken.

The provision of thrombolysis, as has been mentioned, is much too limited. I hope that the Minister will agree that that is an area where the strategy so far is not achieving what we all hope that it will achieve. Last year, only 8 per cent. of patients received thrombolysis, even though 15 per cent. of patients were eligible for that kind of treatment. Both CT scans and thrombolysis fall below National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence standards.

Mr. Lansley: Before the hon. Gentleman carries on, I think that he will find that just over 8 per cent. of the appropriate population receives thrombolysis. The appropriate population is about 15 per cent., and about 8 per cent. of those receive it. In fact, the proportion of stroke patients who receive thrombolysis is just under 1 per cent.

Greg Mulholland: Did I not say 0.8 per cent.?

Mr. Lansley: You said 8 per cent.

Greg Mulholland: I apologise and thank the hon. Gentleman for that correction. I meant to say 0.8 per cent. and appreciate the intervention. May I echo what he has said about the inadequacies in CT scans and thrombolysis? NICE guidelines clearly state that all patients should be scanned, diagnosed and treated with thrombolysis, if required, within an hour. We have to acknowledge that we have a long way to go before we achieve that.

Treatment of mini-strokes—TIAs—has already been mentioned. Effective treatment of TIAs is very important, as the risk of having a stroke within the first four weeks of a TIA is 20 per cent. According to the 2008 RCP stroke audit, only 45 per cent. of hospitals meet the stroke strategy's recommendation of investigating and treating high-risk TIA patients within 24 hours, which means that 55 per cent. of them are not doing so. Again, there is a lot of work to do on that, and I ask the Minister to give us her thoughts on how the figure will be improved.

After-stroke care is the final area of focus in this debate. There are real concerns about stroke patients—and indeed their families, who clearly have an important role to play in the rehabilitation and care of stroke patients—not yet having their needs fulfilled in that regard. After-stroke care is essential to regaining and relearning skills, sometimes even basic skills of everyday living. Rehabilitation is therefore absolutely essential. There have been improvements in that area, but even so, only half of stroke survivors receive rehabilitation in the first six months after discharge, and only a fifth do so in the next six months. I am afraid that it is an area in which, so far, the strategy is simply not delivering.

Post-hospital rehabilitation needs to be organised while the patient is still in hospital, and not when they are discharged, and that has to be addressed. For example, home adaptations clearly have to be done before a patient returns home, so that they can carry on living their life, which is what we very much wish them to be able to do. The provision of information is an easy, cheap way to assist in the important process of rehabilitation, but there need to be improvements to that, too. The stoke audit of 2008 that I mentioned found that there had been little progress since 2006 in improving the amount of information given to patients and carers in hospital about reducing the risks of a further stroke. Of course, the whole purpose of

rehabilitation is not just recovery, but prevention of further strokes. Some 58 per cent. of those patients for whom diet advice was applicable are recorded as having received it, and much of the information that is provided is not particularly helpful. A survey carried out by the Healthcare Commission, admittedly back in 2005, found that only 55 per cent. of patients understood the information that they received in hospital.

I now come to the issue of care for those who are not able to return home. The voluntary sector does a wonderful job in many cases, assisting people in coming to terms with life after a stroke, yet the resources are simply not there, as is the case, I am afraid, for a great deal of social care for people recovering from conditions. I ask the Minister whether it is not time for the Government to consider making more resources available to voluntary groups to enable people to carry on living their lives in the community, or in specialist homes, if that is what medical professionals deem that they need. The whole issue of social care needs more work, and I ask the Minister to address the issue in her comments.

I welcome the opportunity for this debate. I hope that we can have such debates at regular periods throughout the 10-year strategy, no matter which party is in government. It is important that all of us with an interest in this area of health care continue to monitor the implementation of the strategy, because all of us in all parts of the House are absolutely committed to ensuring that stroke care is a priority for the health service, and is very much at the top of the health policy list. All of us will continue to have that commitment, and we want the strategy to succeed.

2.23 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): I particularly want to address the issue of the expansion of stroke services in London, on which Healthcare for London has recently been "consulting" as part of its stroke and major trauma consultation exercise. I put "consulting" in inverted commas, as it has been such a botched consultation that the public see that expansion of services as a cut. In my area, we have seen the unsightly picture of one NHS body advertising and lobbying against another, adding to the atmosphere of confusion and disinformation all round, and turning what should be a positive story into a negative one. Members of Parliament have been kept somewhat out of the loop, too.

Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust wrote to me on 7 April to plead its case, as opposed to that of Northwick Park hospital, for being one of the proposed eight hyperacute stroke units, on the basis of its location. Its letter refers to its existing transient ischaemic attack centre and the need for a local stroke unit. It implied that current services would go as a result of the changes, but of course they will not; they will be continued, as will the services provided by TIA centres and local stroke units everywhere else, and certainly in my area.

Barnet and Chase Farm Hospitals NHS Trust then took out a full-page advertisement in the local newspaper—an advertisement that I can describe only as a scare story. It somewhat irresponsibly implied that cuts, which are not proposed, would be made, and that people's chances of survival would be reduced if the trust did not get its own way. It exhorted people to write into the consultation supporting its views, without giving a true picture of what is proposed, and it whipped up a climate of fear in the area. The Tory council then joined in the act, spending £42,500 on a letter to every household, signed by the leader of the council, who is the Finchley Tory parliamentary candidate. Again, it did not put the argument fairly, but I am pleased, or not pleased, to say that it gave the wrong details regarding how people should send their response by e-mail, so not many responses came in. That was rather a waste of £42,500 of council tax payers' money.

That set off the local papers, which ran stories about NHS cuts, although no cuts, only an expansion of services, were proposed in our area. A headline in the Barnet press stated, "Council kicks out at NHS bid to ditch stroke unit", although there is no bid to ditch any stroke unit. Slightly more responsibly, the *Hendon & Finchley Times* said:

"Every minute you lose is crucial."

There has been no attempt by NHS London or Healthcare for London to show a true picture of what is planned. There was not one effort to write a letter to the local papers explaining what is going on, so a good news story ended up as a cuts story by default. This is my question for my hon. Friend the Minister: when will the NHS get its act together in explaining what is actually going on? When will clinically led plans—that is what the plans are—be properly explained by clinicians to the public? Is it not time that the NHS had a decent communications strategy, with proper, objective, wide consultation on such major plans? If we can do that locally, why can it not be done London-wide, and why has the NHS simply ignored all that is going on? It is simply unacceptable, because the proposals are a good news story.

Clinical evidence shows that patients are 25 per cent. more likely to survive or recover from a stroke if they get treated in a specialist centre. In London, there are big differences in the quality of stroke care. Rates of death in different hospitals vary considerably, and people in outer London have the most limited access to high-quality stroke services, which is why the proposals are particularly important. For some strokes, clot-busting drugs can stop and reverse the damage, but only after a high-quality scan has shown whether the patient is suitable for the drugs, so stroke patients need fast access to scanning facilities to have the best chance of recovery. Currently fewer than 10 per cent. of suitable patients are offered thrombolysis.

So what is proposed? As I have said, the proposals are not a cut. The NHS plans to invest more than £23 million a year extra in new stroke services for London, with more and better trained doctors, nurses and therapists to deliver those new services. There is a proposal for eight hyperacute stroke units, which will provide the immediate response in the first 72 hours after a stroke, or until the patient is stabilised. They will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Anyone having a stroke in London will be taken to one of them to have a brain scan. If appropriate, they will receive the clot-busting drugs within 30 minutes of arriving at the hospital.

More than 20 stroke units will provide ongoing care once the patient is stabilised, and the transient ischaemic attack services will provide rapid assessment and access to a specialist within 24 hours for high-risk patients, or seven days for low-risk patients. Everyone in London

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

will be within a 30-minute ambulance drive of one of those services. Obviously, the issue of how long that journey will take is a matter of contention. It is easy for us who drive around in cars to try to compare how long it would take us to do a journey with how long it would take a blue-light ambulance, but there is no comparison.

The Tory leader of Barnet council—the Finchley Conservative candidate—has suggested that the figures are based on journey times at half-past 2 o'clock in the afternoon. As part of its analysis, Healthcare for London sourced the details of every single ambulance journey in London for three years—about 4 million records. It compared 100,000 blue-light journeys with 2 million other urgent ambulance journeys. It assessed the impact of the day of the week and the rush hour on the journey times, and it conducted a lot more detailed analysis besides. The figure is also backed up by the day-to-day experience of the London ambulance service in taking patients to eight specialist cardiac centres across the capital, so it is not surprising that the LAS supports the proposals. To give my own snapshot, I spent a shift driving around with the ambulance emergency services, and my experience supports the idea that the times are probably achievable.

Locally, research by my PCT in Barnet shows that people living in deprived areas are more likely to die of vascular diseases, to smoke and to be obese, and they are thus at greater risk of having raised blood cholesterol levels, pre-diabetes, diabetes or high blood pressure. They are also less likely to visit their GP and have vascular disease risk factors identified and managed. There is thus a higher risk and incidence of stroke in the most deprived part of the borough—the west—which is my constituency. That has been confirmed by the opinion of the PCT medical director, Dr. Andrew Burnett, with whom I spoke last night. Northwick Park is easier to access from the west, my constituency, than Barnet hospital—a matter to which I shall return.

For our part of London, consideration was given to Northwick Park, Barnet, University College hospital and the Royal Free. NHS London preferred Northwick Park to Barnet, because it provides better travel times and reflects existing patient flows. These arguments are supported by the London ambulance service. From my area the road to Northwick Park is mainly a straight, wide major road, whereas the road to Barnet is little more than a country lane.

Mr. Lansley: In its document, NHS London presented Barnet hospital and Northwick Park as alternatives. Will the hon. Gentleman explain why they need to be alternatives, and why it is not possible for both hospitals to provide scanning and thrombolysis?

Mr. Dismore: If the hon. Gentleman reads the consultation document from Healthcare for London, the answer is there.

Mr. Lansley: Where?

Mr. Dismore: "The shape of things to come", the compact document which is easier to handle when making a speech, states:

"We believe that hyperacute stroke care should be delivered in no more than eight sites across London"—

this is on page 20. It continues:

"This would optimise the number of patients being treated at each site, ensure expert teams are available 24 hours a day—improving survival and reducing disability".

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that if the aim is to provide very specialised high-quality services, it becomes an argument—*[Interruption.]* If he will stop intervening from a sedentary position and let me make the point, I shall be happy to give way to him again. The argument in this case is very much the argument advanced back in the early 1990s by the Government, whom he supported, for the closure of Edgware general hospital and the merging of the accident and emergency department there with that at Barnet hospital, on the basis that by creating a critical mass of patients, a higher quality service could be delivered.

That is exactly what is being proposed in relation to the stroke units. If somebody were to convince me and Healthcare for London that an equally high-quality service could be delivered at Barnet hospital, I would have no objection. My concern is for my constituents—not for the whole of Barnet, not for Enfield, but for my constituents, who would find access to Northwick Park rather easier from the particularly deprived parts of my constituency than they would to Barnet.

Mr. Lansley: I had not realised that the consultation in London was somehow the fault of the previous Conservative Government, but then everything that the hon. Gentleman complains about is probably the fault of the previous Conservative Government. My point is not that some of his constituents should be advantaged by using Northwick Park rather than Barnet. I contend that there is nothing in the consultation document that demonstrates why it is not possible, as has been said, by NHS East of England, for example, for a large number of emergency departments to continue to offer acute care of stroke, including thrombolysis, as long as they are able to have, for example, immediate access to CT. The emergency departments of most hospitals increasingly have access to CT. The images can be sent somewhere else for interpretation—the specialist part—if necessary.

Mr. Dismore: I certainly do not hold the hon. Gentleman responsible for the consultation. His Government were not interested in spending an extra £23 million on services. They were interested in cutting services. The point that I am making is that a very similar argument was advanced by his Government for closing Edgware general hospital—that better A and E services could be delivered through the critical mass resulting from a bigger patient base at Barnet hospital than at the two hospitals, Edgware and Barnet.

I listened to what the hon. Gentleman said, and no doubt my hon. Friend the Minister will respond to it later. We need a critical mass of patients to be able to deliver high-quality services. We have a difference of view. Obviously, if it is possible to have stroke care at both hospitals, I have no objection, but if that is not possible, I prefer, on behalf of my constituents who live in the deprived part of the borough, the existing proposals for Northwick Park to the case for Barnet.

We debated across the Floor the subject of UCH and the Royal Free. Preference was given to UCH, although I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the services at the Royal Free are of a very high quality. As I explained to him, I raised the matter with the Royal Free. It has

accepted the proposal that it should work in partnership with UCH on the basis that UCH is able to provide better standards than the Royal Free at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, which is part of UCH. It is also important to point out that the Royal Free and UCH scored higher than Barnet on future clinical standards.

Given the criteria in the consultation, I understand why Northwick Park was preferred to Barnet. It is important to recognise that the hyperacute units are only part of the story. I object to the scare stories run by the Conservative party that we will see the closure of stroke units and TIA units across London, which is not the case. As far as I can see, not only in my constituency but in my sector of London, those units will continue. That is the general picture, from what I know of other parts of the capital. It is wrong to suggest that those units will close and to scare people in that way.

The TIA services for people who have had a mini-stroke will be provided at hospitals with hyperacute units or ordinary stroke units, as they are now. These assessment services will reduce the chance of someone going on to have a full stroke by up to 80 per cent. TIA and stroke services are provided at Barnet and at the Royal Free, as well as at Northwick Park and UCH, and they will continue to be there. The intention is to provide a comprehensive service, including the existing units at Barnet and the Royal Free.

An additional point that I put forward in my response to the consultation was that I would like to see continuing care and rehabilitation services provided at Edgware community hospital as well. The rehabilitation services there have extra capacity, which could be expanded to deliver additional help in a constructive way and closer to home for patients suffering from the long-term after-effects of stroke.

2.37 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I begin by apologising to the Chair, the Minister, colleagues and Members in that I may not be in the Chamber for the full duration of the debate. I have other commitments at the Foreign Affairs Committee later this afternoon.

Strokes are one of the most widespread and expensive conditions in the UK, costing the nation around £7 billion every single year, and on current trends the prevalence is set to increase at a worrying rate. Years of neglect in this area of public health policy have left the UK with the unenviable reputation of having some of the worst outcomes for stroke patients in the whole of western Europe.

I was lucky enough in April to secure a Westminster Hall debate on cardiac and vascular health. May I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for honouring her commitment to answer the questions that remained outstanding at the end of the debate, and for the detailed responses that she sent me? It was during that debate that I highlighted the work of the Cardio & Vascular Coalition, which has published key recommendations for a new integrated approach to cardiac and vascular conditions for policy makers to consider.

The 10-year national strategic framework is coming to an end but as yet we have no firm commitment from the Government to extend the strategy for a further 10 years. The British Heart Foundation, the Stroke Association, the British Cardiovascular Society and the Royal College of General Practitioners and many other smaller organisations which belong to the coalition would like the Government to give a commitment to the strategy. The 10-year mental health strategy has been renewed. Why cannot the framework strategy for cardiac and vascular health be renewed in a similar way? I await the Minister's response to the letter that I recently sent her on that point.

Cardiovascular diseases, which include heart attack, stroke, diabetes and chronic kidney disease, affect the lives of more than 4 million people in England, cause 170,000 deaths each year, and are responsible for about one fifth of all hospital admissions. The challenge posed by those conditions is stark. Cardiac and vascular disease remains the No. 1 cause of death and disability in the United Kingdom, and strokes alone are the UK's third biggest killer—the second biggest if each type of cancer is counted separately—and the single biggest cause of severe adult disability. To our continuing embarrassment, the death rate for coronary heart disease and stroke in men and women is still higher in the UK than in comparable western European countries, and some risk factors for cardiovascular diseases, particularly obesity and a lack of physical activity, are increasing. On current trends, 60 per cent. of males and 50 per cent. of females will be obese by 2050, and, if unchecked, it is predicted that that will lead to a massive increase in type 2 diabetes, with the current trend indicating that more than 4 million people in the UK will have the condition by 2025. That, of course, will result in a large increase in the number of patients who require medication to prevent cardiac and vascular events.

I welcome the national stroke strategy, which was launched at the end of 2007. Two central elements of the strategy are that patients should be admitted directly to a unit capable of undertaking immediate CT scanning and, where appropriate, undergo thrombolysis. It is absolutely crucial, as many contributors to this debate have said, that stroke victims are seen as quickly as possible. In that regard, I think that FAST, the new TV campaign, which has been mentioned on many occasions, has been successful. I commend the Government on their initiative in that regard.

There is no doubt that, on the whole, hospital-based stroke services are improving and more stroke survivors have access to long-term care and support in the community. Yet, despite those developments, stroke services throughout England remain patchy and in need of considerable improvement. Sustained financial and political investment is therefore essential to maintain the momentum behind improving services that the strategy created.

Rehabilitation and long-term support in the community remain the weakest element of the pathway for many stroke survivors. Previous investigation has found that only about half the individuals who experience a stroke receive rehabilitation that meets their needs in the first six months following discharge from hospital, with the figure falling to one fifth of individuals in the following six months. The Healthcare Commission's 2006 stroke patients survey showed that one year after discharge, more than half—about 54 per cent.—of patients said that they had not received any home help; that one third, or 32 per cent., had not received help with personal care; and that 45 per cent. had not received help with applying for benefits.

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

I should like to put two questions to the Minister. First, what progress is being made in ensuring health and social care services work together to provide stroke survivors with a seamless transfer of care from hospital to the community? Secondly, what progress has been made in providing high-quality specialist rehabilitation and support for as long as a stroke survivor requires it?

It is generally accepted that the Royal College of Physicians' national sentinel audit of stroke has provided an extremely useful tool for monitoring the implementation of standards and improvements in services in the acute sector, but there has not been a similar focus on monitoring community services for stroke survivors. Is it therefore the Government's intention to consider funding an extension to community stroke care of the RCP's auditing process?

The operational plans for 2008-09 to 2010-11, entitled "National Planning Guidance and 'vital signs'", require PCTs to implement the stroke strategy. Monitoring will include, first, the number of patients who spend at least 90 per cent. of their time on a stroke unit and, secondly, the percentage of high-risk transient ischaemic attacks, or mini-strokes, that are treated within 24 hours. I am pleased to say that NHS Cambridgeshire, my local primary care trust, has responded positively through its newly published strategy. Indeed, as many contributors to this debate have emphasised, a key part of the strategy is prevention.

NHS Cambridgeshire recently began a specific initiative in the 20 per cent. most deprived practices to implement vascular risk checks and proactively identify more people with risk factors for CVD who will then be added to the CVD risk register. It intends to offer practices a range of options for providing vascular risk checks to those people aged 40 to 70 years old, ranging from practices managing the vascular checks in their entirety, to working with a health adviser and community pharmacy-based provision.

There is no doubt in my mind that in community pharmacies we have a fairly universal and readily accessible professional resource that could play a key role in an NHS health check programme. I strongly believe that community pharmacies could play a vital role in the battle against stroke by, for example, providing a regular blood pressure and cholesterol test. That new role seems to have been actively encouraged by parts of the NHS, but not universally. Some PCTs seem reluctant—through ignorance, professional opposition, lack of focus or simple tardiness—to embrace its great potential. I am delighted that NHS Cambridgeshire has alluded to the potential role of pharmacies, but it requires more than just a reference in a strategic document. A commitment to driving the concept through at ground level is vital, and I, for one, will monitor the PCT's progress.

The PCT's strategy also means that patients will be identified with risk factors using the Framingham method, including those with post myocardial infarction and those with transient ischaemic attacks. It means also that patients alert will be utilised for GPs, indicating when preventive measures are required, in line with National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance. The PCT will continue to make the links to smoking cessation services, with a guaranteed recording of data on lifestyle and outcomes, and it will work with the public health directorate to support prevention messages, particularly in disadvantaged areas and groups. It is also vital to make appropriate links with the cross-government strategy for tackling obesity and with prevention work, in line with vascular checks. Finally, the PCT intends to roll out the scheme in the most deprived practices first. That will be of most benefit to my constituency of North-East Cambridgeshire, which has some of the highest deprivation indices in Cambridgeshire.

The Government say that they are committed to evaluating the implementation of the stroke strategy, but how do they plan to evaluate its implementation, when will the Department of Health commission an evaluation of progress of health, what form will it take and when can we expect the results to be made public?

In conclusion, stroke services are improving as a result of the stroke strategy, but there is still a long way to go to meet the standards contained in the 20 quality markers. Progress has not necessarily been made at the same rate throughout the country, and, in order to maintain and build on the achievements that have been made so far, continued investment will be required. In that regard, what plans do the Government have to ensure that improvements continue to be made after the current three-year funding round ends? How will the Government ensure that stroke remains a national priority?

2.48 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am very pleased to be able to make a short contribution to the debate. I also welcome the expertise that was so clearly demonstrated by my hon. Friend the Minister, by the shadow Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt).

I speak not with any expertise in the matter, but as someone who has spent some time at their local hospital, Guy's and St. Thomas's, and received valuable advice from Dr. Tony Rudd. I am well aware that I am not an expert in the same sense as some of those who have already spoken, but, as a London MP, I want to look at the consultation in London—the Healthcare for London consultation entitled "The Shape of Things to Come". I welcome much of it and believe that it is in line with the Government's excellent prioritisation of stroke services. To that extent, I welcome again the national stroke strategy and the work done by the all-party stroke group and the Stroke Association. I particularly welcome the dedication shown by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen), to the issue; it is great to have a Minister who has had hands-on experience of working in the national health service.

As we all know, we need to develop new, high-quality stroke services in London. There are inequalities that need to be addressed, and the document will have addressed many of them. The problem arises when I come to consider my own area and the rest of south-east London. At the moment, King's college hospital and St. Thomas's hospital have very good stroke units. King's college London, the Maudsley, King's college hospital, Guy's hospital and St. Thomas's hospital are working in an admirable way; they are doing hugely valuable work right across London.

King's college hospital and St. Thomas's hospital, together with their academic partners at King's college London, have a long history of collaboration on stroke services; that will inevitably increase as a result of the successful accreditation of King's Health Partners as an academic health science centre. The collaboration has included the primary care trusts of Lambeth and Southwark, encompassing the full pathway of stroke care, including out-of-hospital care. The two hospitals have consistently been among the highest scoring in the Royal College of Physicians national sentinel stroke audit, including the most recently published report of April 2009.

Under the proposals, there would be one large hyper-unit at King's college hospital. Like other colleagues who have spoken, I genuinely cannot understand the rationale for going for the strict decision in favour of eight large units. As I said, I speak from a common-sense, not an expert, point of view, but to me there is no evidence that the model of very large acute stroke units with 20 to 30 beds and, say, 2,000 to 3,000 admissions a year, is a clinically effective, safe or feasible way of delivering stroke care. It has not been tested anywhere else in the world, and the vast majority of the professionals consulted during the development of the plans favoured a larger number of units—perhaps 10 to 14 throughout London—with fewer beds.

There are concerns that big units will not make sense when so few people in London receive high-quality acute stroke care. The interim period, during which the eight high-quality units will be developed, will be a long time—a minimum of three to five years, according to what I have been told; I am thinking particularly of the units that were not established beforehand. With the best will in the world, units designated for eventual closure are bound to suffer planning blight and will quickly deteriorate to unacceptable levels through the loss of good staff to other centres and the failure to recruit new staff.

The good units that we have at the moment will be needed to help, support and develop the increased new units. However, that will get more and more difficult if there is not the necessary flexibility, particularly if anything goes wrong or if there is a surge in demand.

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a good point. Does she agree that if a lot of investment has to go into the eight major centres, there is a danger that other, more local hospitals that have not been chosen to be hyper-units, but run good acute centres and transient ischaemic attack, or TIA, services, could be starved of the cash necessary to maintain—or, indeed, improve—their services as the money goes to the hyper-units? Is that a danger?

Kate Hoey: I welcome the increased investment that the Government are putting in, but the danger to which my hon. Friend refers is there. There is always a danger that large super-duper elements in any provision will tend to take away from what most people want, which is good local services.

I go back to the point about central London that I made in an intervention on the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. The consultation document's calculations for all the bed requirements do not take into account the non-resident population of London—the huge numbers of commuters from outside the city, the tourists and so on. The majority of those people come to central London. That is not to say that we do not need to improve radically the services in outer London areas, but I do not see the rationale for getting rid of the really good unit in central London—in the critical area of St. Thomas's, with its access to railway stations—to create something bigger elsewhere. King's college, Guy's and St. Thomas's hospitals are already working together, and they want to do so.

There is a need for a radical approach to modernised stroke services in London, and much in the proposals is excellent. For example, this is the first time that standards have been set with clear requirements on the providers to deliver appropriate staffing levels. The issue, however, is about the actual model that has been chosen for London; that needs to be considered again. The people who are already working well in those hospitals and really know what is happening have not been listened to enough. NHS London needs to listen to the professionals, not entrench itself in what seems to be a fundamentalist approach. The approach needs to change; the primary care group that makes the decision in July needs to go back and make sure that it has listened and understood what is happening in the units that already do extremely good work.

St. Thomas's serves diverse communities, which are more likely to be in need of a stroke unit. It also deals with commuters and all the tourists who come to central London. It has the expertise. The idea is to let that go to create a bigger unit at King's college hospital. Why do we not allow the two hospitals to plan and work out together what is in the best interests of the area? I hope that those making the decision at the end of the consultation will listen. If I had to choose between the expertise of Dr. Tony Rudd and that of members of the primary care trust, I know whom I would support.

2.58 pm

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I start by recognising the improvements that have been made to stroke services in recent years. There has, of course, been a gradual improvement since the war, but the focus on strokes has increased in the past few years. A great deal of the credit for that must go to our clinical networks, health care professionals and the research community. I say that particularly because 25 years ago I trained in a national health service that did not regard strokes as a particular priority. The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), who is no longer in her place, reflected on the standard of care and the expectations of stroke patients that prevailed at that time, and that put me in mind of the sorts of cases that I came across. It was all particularly to the disadvantage of older people; classically, elderly stroke victims have tended to be put to one side. I am pleased to note that that tends not to be the case these days, but there is perhaps some complacency, and a danger of forgetting that the elderly are still not given the priority that they deserve. Stroke, given that it is classically a condition that is more likely with advancing years, is a case in point.

Having marked the improvement in standards that has prevailed over the past few years, we must also recognise that it took rather a long time for the Government to come up with their national stroke strategy—some 10 years—and it required a bit of prompting by way of

[Dr. Andrew Murrison]

the 2005 National Audit Office report, "Reducing Brain Damage: Faster access to better stroke care". I may be a pedant, but I think that the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) was a little hasty in suggesting that the national stroke strategy had had demonstrable effects. It may well have had, and I suspect that it will be effective, but we must be careful about making premature assertions that are not firmly rooted in the evidence.

Greg Mulholland: I am not aware that I used the word "demonstrable". In fact, I was referring to improvements mentioned in the audits, so they come from evidence, not opinion. That is an important point to make.

Dr. Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but he needs to understand that there is a danger in extrapolating evidence from the sentinel study—I think that that is the one that he was citing—which came out just a few months after the implementation of the national strategy. Given that it is a 10-year strategy, and given previous trends, it would be extremely rash to suppose that it had had any effect at the time of the sentinel audit. I very much hope that the strategy will prove to be successful—I suspect that it will—but we need to be a bit careful about the language that we use in anticipation of that.

It is important to compare this country's outcomes and incidence of disease with those nations with which we can reasonably be compared. In this context, I think particularly of western Europe. Standardised death rates from stroke among men under the age of 64 are nine per 100,000 in the UK compared with seven per 100,000 in France. The equivalent figures for women are seven deaths per 100,000 in the UK compared with four per 100,000 in France and in Spain. The UK has some of the worst outcomes for patients in western Europe. In one study, the differences between the UK and eight other European countries in terms of the proportion of patients left dead or dependent were between 150 and 300 events per 1,000 patients. That statistical material is rather technical stuff, but it points towards patients in Britain not doing as well as they have a right to expect, and it certainly suggests that there is no room for complacency.

The Minister spoke about health checks and vascular risk assessments and invited the Opposition to support those initiatives. I have campaigned for many years for screening for abdominal aortic aneurysm, yet despite recommendations by the National Screening Committee we still do not have a credible roll-out of national screening for that particular condition. The Government need to be careful; interventions in the public health sphere, particularly in terms of prevention, need to be based on the evidence, which points towards instituting a screening programme expeditiously. I very much regret that that has not been done.

What has changed over the past few years with stroke? It has gone from being a condition with chronicity to one that is seen as existing within the acute sector. It has become a medical emergency; of course, it always was, but it was not recognised as such. Unfortunately, as the Stroke Association observes, it is still not necessarily seen as a condition that requires immediate treatment and management—neither by potential patients nor, sometimes alarmingly, by health care professionals on the front line. That has been clearly shown by NOP and MORI polling over the past few years.

Since the figures came out in October 2008, we have had the Department of Health campaign. We have all seen the television adverts that are part of that, which have been extremely good. The images are disturbing, but it is sometimes necessary to be fairly hard-hitting in order to change attitudes and behaviour. We will have to see whether the effects of that campaign are enduring. I was concerned to hear the hon. Member for Crawley, who has some experience in these matters, suggest that in a few years' time, when the funding runs out, we might simply move on to the next hot topic. Our approach needs to be a bit more long-term than that. As we have seen with road traffic campaigns, there is a danger that when we go on to the next topic we forget the public health messages that have been put across effectively, at least in the short term. That would be a great pity in the context of stroke. There have been a few measures of the campaign's effectiveness—for example, the Stroke Association has said that it has had more inquiries since the campaign kicked off in February. However, I should like the Minister to clarify what assessment the Government intend to make of its enduring effectiveness, which would, I hope, inform any future campaigns.

If we are serious about public health and dealing with health inequalities, we have to address stroke, which is far more prevalent in less advantaged groups in our society, as well as in certain ethnic groups. We need to try to work out why that is and put in place measures to reduce that inequality. In my intervention on the Minister, I mentioned the effects of stroke on the rural poor. It is bad being poor, but it is particularly bad in a rural location where access to services is extremely difficult. Following my intervention, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), I wonder whether the Minister has had any note from the Box about upgrading stroke from category B to category A, which is being considered by the Department's emergency call prioritisation group; if not, perhaps it would be possible to communicate separately on that subject. Such a step might be a way of improving access for people with stroke who live in rural areas.

There is evidence that someone's chances of optimal management for stroke are best if they arrive at hospital by ambulance. However, according to the sentinel audit, only 17 per cent. of patients reach a stroke unit within four hours of arrival at hospital. I suspect that further work needs to be done in accident and emergency to improve triage and expedite the definitive management of stroke patients. That appears to be especially required at weekends, as, crucially, the chance of getting a scan, and therefore definitive treatment, is very much less out of hours.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. A brain scan should take place within three hours, and it will determine the outcome for stroke victims, so it is absolutely essential. Will he at least give the Government credit for their policy of trying to ensure that stroke victims get taken by ambulance straight to a specialist centre rather than to a general hospital so that they can get that treatment early, which will improve outcomes for them?

Dr. Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will deal with the question of specialist units versus district general hospitals in the remainder of my speech. However, his remarks spark me to reflect on the change in radiological protocols that has occurred in recent years. There has been a strong trend towards reducing the amount of elective work that is done out of hours. For example, it is now difficult to get a chest X-ray out of hours unless it is a real emergency, and very few are defined as emergencies requiring imaging. That is fine—it is absolutely right—but I sometimes wonder whether we have gone a little too far. I suspect that as part of the process, there is less willingness to do CT scans on stroke patients out of hours. We need to look again at our protocols to ensure that a medical emergency is investigated as such, 24/7.

Harry Cohen: The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the need to improve triage at the hospital to which a patient is taken, including at the weekend. Although there has been an improvement in ambulance services, does he believe that one missing element of the stroke service is a review of whether we can get further improvements, so that ambulances get to patients quickly and get them to the main centres quickly? Does he think that there is a case for that?

Dr. Murrison: Yes, and I understand that the Minister's Department is doing that work at the moment. It is reviewing whether we should upgrade from category B from category A—from 18 minutes to nine minutes—the response time for stroke cases. It will be interesting to learn the outcome of that work. I suspect that part of the reason for the effectiveness of arriving by ambulance rather than under one's own steam, and the likelihood of getting prompter treatment when arriving by ambulance, is that triages are undertaken by ambulance crews. They are therefore able to warn specialist stroke units that a patient will be arriving. Across a range of clinical areas we find that such warning expedites admission to specialist units, as patients do not have to go through the sieve of accident and emergency and the inevitable delay that is caused. I have some first-hand experience of that.

Stroke services are somewhat patchy across the country. A postcode lottery applies, despite the fact that we have a national health service. The Stroke Association is concerned about that, as is the Royal College of Physicians, and the sentinel audit underscores that concern. In my own area, I find to my delight that according to the audit, the Royal United hospital and Salisbury hospital are reckoned to be good. However, my constituents go much further afield on occasion, and I find that Yeovil, Bristol, Weston and Gloucester are okay, but that Taunton and interestingly Swindon have much room for improvement.

I caution against the evidence that has accrued about the use of specialist centres being used to favour large centres at the expense of district general hospitals. Stroke is not an obscure disease, it is a condition that strikes somebody in England every five minutes and the third most common cause of death in this country. The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who is no longer in his place, talked about critical mass, which is important in the case of tertiary services. Nobody doubts that a patient should go to a tertiary unit for obscure conditions. Stroke is not unusual, it is bread and butter for district general hospitals. If it were removed from their responsibility, one would wonder about the foundations of the district hospital model. Quite honestly, a condition that causes the third most deaths in this country and sadly provides a patient every five minutes in England must be part of the underpinning of any acute service and part of its bread and butter.

The investigation and treatment of stroke is not particularly complicated. In saying that, I do not underplay in any way the expertise of those who specialise in it. It relies upon a CT scanner—we are working towards a position where pretty well every hospital will have one—and access to telemedicine. In other words, a particular hospital does not necessarily need a specialist, because the information can be relayed and, crucially, a diagnosis made in that way. The treatment itself should not be beyond any acute unit in this country.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend will not have had an opportunity to look up the figures before responding to the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), but the latest figures in the sentinel audit clearly demonstrate that Southend hospital had the best results anywhere in the east of England.

Dr. Murrison: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have noted that with some pleasure.

We need to be careful about using a Darzi extrapolation to the point where we lose immediacy and patient access. I speak as somebody who represents small towns and a rural area in Wiltshire. So far as I am able to gauge my constituents' wishes—we have all had some opportunity to gauge interest on a range of subjects over the past few days—it seems to me that what they want is local services, locally provided, unless there is very good reason why not. Our national health service should be designed around their needs and wishes rather than necessarily the convenience of practitioners or how they want to operate.

Stroke is a good case in point, because there is no real reason why we cannot provide both diagnosis and treatment in a specialist context within district general hospitals. It would be a real pity if we were to rusticate stroke services to our great clinical cathedrals in our larger urban centres. London has been discussed at length today, and those services should not be restricted to a small number of hyper-acute units in the capital.

3.16 pm

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): I shall begin by talking about some improvements in stroke services. From that, my hon. Friend the Minister can see where my speech will go towards the end.

I make no apology for continuing to talk about London services, the increased investment in which is welcome. There has been £23 million of additional spending on stroke services, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) said. There is a predicted increase in survival rates of some 25 per cent. Notwithstanding the fact that, as he said, some deliberate misinformation has been put about by Opposition parties—I shall say something about that in a moment—it

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is interesting that all parties have taken on board the central point about the creation of hyper-acute stroke units.

I tend to agree with what the Opposition have said about the strict adherence to numbers. The idea that specialist stroke treatment will be a major factor in saving lives over the next few years was initially received with some scepticism, but in the light of overwhelming clinical evidence it has now been widely accepted, which is a good thing.

Like others, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister for her contribution, not only in her professional capacity and as a Minister but as my neighbouring MP. I was very pleased to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the NHS with her late last year at Charing Cross hospital, where she herself has worked and in which she continues to have a great interest and support me. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), who was briefly in his place, has been extremely helpful with regard to the difficulties that I have experienced in the current consultation.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Stroke Association, which others have mentioned. It has done an excellent job in its recent report and in encouraging the Government and giving them praise where it is due. I do not say that only because when its staff were testing blood pressure in Portcullis House last month, they said that I had the blood pressure of a young man. I think is the only thing that I can claim to have about me that is of a young man.

The current consultation ended on 8 May, and it has been mentioned several times this afternoon. The matter has been shockingly handled by Healthcare for London. I shall start by dealing with my simpler concern: the stroke unit at Ealing hospital. If the current proposals are implemented, that stroke unit will be closed. When I spoke to the neurologists and other professionals at Ealing, I found it was envisaged that the alternative provision would be at either Northwick Park or Charing Cross hospitals. Things have now moved on, and there is a worse plan. However, even at that stage, there was serious concern and some astonishment at such a proposal. I could speak for a long time about that one issue, and I am sure that other hon. Members could present arguments for hospitals in their constituencies or those nearby, which their constituents use extensively.

Ealing hospital stroke unit provides good care, has just been refurbished to a high standard and is in the top 25 per cent. of stroke units in the country. It is by no means clear from the current proposal how the many people from the borough of Ealing and around who use the unit will be accommodated in future. There is no evidence that the capacity problems arising from the stroke unit's removal will be picked up by the alternative proposals. However, at least the proposal for Ealing is clear. The unit is to close and there is to be alternative provision. I repeat that the case for the need to hone provision to eight units and the case for their location have not been well made, but at least the decision is clear, if incorrect.

The position of Charing Cross hospital, which is just outside my current constituency, but extensively used by my constituents, is far from clear. There is a proposal no longer to have one of the new hyper-acute stroke units there in the longer term. To avoid doubt and to be brief, I can do no better than read out part of my submission to the consultation. I said:

"I do not accept that this consultation has been properly or transparently conducted and I believe the outcome of it—certainly as far as it affects my constituents—has been pre-determined."

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) made that point earlier. My submission continued:

"I remain hopeful that I am wrong in this surmise, but if I am not I hope there may be some challenge, legal or otherwise to the proposals Healthcare for London are currently recommending for Charing Cross Hospital.

Specifically, there is no clarity as to the process by which the preferred location of the fourth major trauma centre was switched at short notice from Charing Cross to St. Mary's Hospital. This having been done however, there is a preferred option for St. Mary's stated in the document with an attached footnote that the transfer of the hyper-acute stroke unit (HASU), currently proposed for Charing Cross, will in the space of two to three years follow the trauma centre to St. Mary's. I have spoken to clinicians at Charing Cross who believe this is the wrong course of action both in clinical and geographical terms. But this aspect of the proposal does not appear to be open for discussion. Rather it is the settled view of Healthcare for London that co-location is the sine qua non in deciding the location of this HASU.

I do not see how Healthcare for London expect serious responses to such proposals which have all the appearance of being last minute, botched and above all so closely interconnected as to be incapable of being unravelled. I do not think the logistics of moving stroke and neurology services from Charing Cross to St. Mary's have been properly studied: the site, the funding and the relative size and importance of the clinical units at both hospitals strongly suggest the better option is building on the excellent provision currently at Charing Cross.

I would like to be reassured that if as expected a HASU opens at Charing Cross later this year, if the proposal to move this to St. Mary's in 2012 or shortly thereafter is pursued there will be a full and impartial consultation at that time."

The well respected and extensive stroke services at Charing Cross were to be combined with one of the major trauma centres for London, but the quality of the trauma bid was apparently not good enough, as was the case with the Royal Free, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon has a constituency interest. Rather than those two bids being resubmitted, at short notice the trauma centre bid was switched to St. Mary's and that is now the preferred bid. It has been admitted to me in several meetings with health care professionals, the hospital trusts, the primary care trust, Healthcare for London and, indeed, the Under-Secretary, that it is a done deal: St. Mary's will be the trauma centre.

Suddenly, as an afterthought, and done by asterisk and footnote in the consultation document, and clearly because the co-location proposal is sacrosanct, the stroke unit at Charing Cross, which is currently being prepared and will open, function and doubtless be extremely good for two years, will somehow move to the St. Mary's site, which is inappropriate. There is no provision for it and clinicians to whom I have spoken doubt whether there are funds for it. The proposal is a dog's breakfast, for want of a better phrase.

There may be a guarantee of further consultation in future. That is not good enough. I have made the point strongly to the chief executive of Healthcare for London that no proper consultation has been carried out—that

is clear from the document—and the matter needs to be revisited. Clearly, decisions have been made and put out for consultation thereafter.

One of the unfortunate side effects is the mischief that can be made, and mischief aplenty has been made with the future of Charing Cross hospital for more than four years. It is a perfect site for a hospital; it is perfectly accessible. The decision affects not only constituents in Hammersmith and Fulham and Ealing but those in the entire London boroughs of Hounslow and Ealing and the wider area of west London, to whom Charing Cross is far more accessible than St. Mary's. The site is large, with plenty of room for redevelopment, which is already taking place. However, the botched decisions, the poor quality of decision making and the lack of information allow mischief to be made.

There have been persistent rumours of downgrading or closure since 2005. The hospital was a major issue in the general election campaign. It suits the Conservative party locally to continue to keep those rumours alive and I have therefore been in conversation and correspondence with successive Health Ministers since I was elected to get assurances about the future of Charing Cross hospital. Those assurances are freely and readily given, and I have a copy here of the latest letter from the chief executive of NHS London, which is dated 29 May.

The letter states that even if the hyper-acute stroke unit moves in due course from Charing Cross, the

"stroke unit at Charing Cross hospital will be enhanced to deliver high quality stroke services for the people of Hammersmith and Fulham. We expect Charing Cross to retain a full range of services as a busy hospital for local residents maintaining its prominent position in the community."

The letter goes on to say that the hospital will provide

"a broad range of elective specialist services, as well as emergency services with the associated medical specialties, and an active A&E. It will continue to provide neurology and stroke services, including post 72-hour stroke care, rehabilitation and outpatient services."

The chief executive could have added that one of the largest and most ambitious polyclinics is being built there, with a full GP practice on the side, in addition to many other new buildings, including the highly prestigious Maggie's cancer centre, which was visited by Sarah Brown and Michelle Obama on the President's recent visit. There is therefore no question but that Charing Cross has a bright and expanding future, with or without the hyper-acute stoke unit and trauma centre. Again, let me make it clear for the record that the Government are to be praised for that investment. In addition, since the formation of the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and the Academic Health Science Centre, the prospects for health care in west London have never been better.

However, the chief executive and the Minister can write as many letters to me as they wish, but what my constituents believe—because they are told so every fortnight in the only local newspaper in wide circulation, which is controlled by the Conservative council—is that Charing Cross is being downgraded or closed. That is deliberate disinformation, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon said, put out with mischievous political intent by the Conservatives. However, they would not be able to do so were it not for the administrative confusion, complacency and lack of attention by health service managers in London.

There is now a ridiculous conflict of interest, whereby the managements of the Conservative local authority and the local health service have fused. Therefore, the person who is charged locally, as the chief executive of what was called the PCT, with rebutting the accusation that the health service is not receiving investment, is being downgraded and is in decline, is exactly the same person putting out the propaganda saying that it is. The situation is quite surreal. I have raised the matter with Healthcare for London, but it prefers to make no comment. Just as in Hendon, where one part of the NHS is briefing against another, we now have a chief executive of the local authority who damns the health service in the morning and then, as the chief executive of the health service, tries to defend or praise it in the afternoon.

That cannot be allowed to continue, because at bottom it affects my constituent's confidence in the local health service, which is excellent and improving. In my opinion, the only solution is to abandon at least those parts of the consultation that are discredited and were never consulted on in the first place, and which can only lead to a conclusion that is at best inadequate and at worst detrimental to patient care. I would ask my hon. Friend in responding to this debate to say that she will ask Healthcare for London to look at the situation again, because it is not satisfactory for us to go forward with, on the whole, an excellent proposal for stroke and trauma care—one that will improve services and save lives—without the certainty that things are being done with honesty and integrity, and in a way that will not confuse or undermine the health service in west London or people's opinion of it.

3.32 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): Let me start by declaring an interest, in that I am very much in the age group of those who can expect to suffer a stroke at some time in the not-too-distant future. I support the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and have visited the stroke unit at St. Thomas's, which is absolutely excellent, and I would be delighted to go there, if I had to.

I will be as brief as I can and cover just three aspects, the first of which is emergency calls. It is crucial that emergency calls are taken seriously by all facilities—that is, by the ambulance people as well as by the doctors. I have long argued in favour of having another telephone number in addition to 999 for those who do not think that they are an acute emergency, but would like advice. That is particularly important for someone who gets a transient ischaemic attack, but then gets better and does not know what to do. It would be useful if they had another number that they could contact easily, which would tell them that such an attack is a serious warning that they have to act on.

Let me turn to stroke care networks. I would like the Minister to tell me in her winding-up speech what her idea of the stroke care network is. An article in the 21 May edition of the *Health Service Journal* entitled "Sink or Swim" deals with the importance of district general hospitals to local communities. We should be considering two different kinds of stroke unit, namely larger units in major centres and local units, which are crucial for sorting out people with transient ischaemic attacks and with strokes that do not necessarily need

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thrombolysis. NHS East of England has already been referred to in the debate, and it is mentioned in the article:

"Many district general hospitals are keen to retain core emergency services. NHS East of England has committed to retaining A&E and consultant led obstetrics at all its trusts and thrombolysis for stroke patients, at least part of the time."

It seems possible to have pretty widespread local stroke units that will deal with all forms of stroke, with a number of them being able to give thrombolysis as well. At this point, I must refer to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence's technology appraisal, which is mandatory. It states:

"The Committee was aware that in the UK, physicians with experience in stroke care are not always the same as those specialised in neurological care. The Committee concluded that alteplase"—

the clot-buster—

"should be used by a physician trained and experienced in the management of acute stroke and only in centres with facilities that enable it to be used in full accordance with its marketing authorisation."

That sets quite a high target for the stroke units that will be providing that therapy, but it is something that we should aim for. We have already heard that the time limit for administering that treatment is exactly three hours. For a patient to get to a unit, have the scan and receive the treatment within three hours is enormously demanding. That is why I hope that, as well as there being networks, some of the local units will also be able to provide thrombolysis, at least part of the time.

Speaking from an out-of-London perspective, I believe that transport is also crucial. If the major stroke centres are to be located only in a few places, we are going to need to use the air ambulance service much more than we do at the moment. That raises the question of when the Government are going to consider making some sort of contribution to running air ambulances.

I hope that the local stroke units will become widespread, but I must point out the necessity of their each having a complete team. They will need not only doctors and nurses but, as has been pointed out many times, speech therapists. Unless things have changed in the past few months, speech therapists are almost as rare as hens' teeth. The units will also need physiotherapists and occupational therapists, but they, too, are shortage specialties. Rehabilitation is essential for the long-term care of people with strokes when one has not been able to prevent the completion of the stroke.

Finally, the Next Stage review recognises the risk that reconfiguration can make services fall down. The Under-Secretary of State in the House of Lords has made it clear that we must never reconfigure until alternatives are in place, otherwise there will be an untenable gap.

3.38 pm

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor). I want to begin my speech on a personal note. My father-in-law, Sir John Keegan, had a stroke four weeks ago. He survived due to the swift response of his local ambulance service and the immediate care that he received at Salisbury district hospital in the critical first three hours following his stroke. I want to thank the doctors and nurses in the Farley unit at Salisbury district hospital for all their after-care in the past four weeks. In particular, my mother-in-law, Susanne, my wife, Lucy, my brothers-in-law, Tom and Matthew, and my sister-in-law, Rose, share my gratitude.

As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison)—in whose constituency my in-laws live—stroke is the country's third largest killer. It is also the single largest cause of adult disability, a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) at the beginning of the debate. We all have constituents who have been affected and I suspect that most of us may have experienced a stroke within our own families, as I did recently. Yet for too long, strokes have been the poor relation in the NHS, so I welcome the long overdue national stroke strategy of 2007, which finally prioritised stroke care for health and social care providers. Our response needs to be commensurate with the sheer size of the problem.

The strategy has undoubtedly brought progress, but we must not stand still on the issue. Not enough patients are receiving the treatment and care that they need quickly enough and too many are subject to a dangerous postcode lottery. Inequalities in access to stroke units and long-term care all too often mean that where people live can dramatically affect the length of recovery from a stroke—or even whether they recover at all.

If we want to improve stroke services, we must focus essentially on three elements: first, saving lives in hospital; secondly, reducing disabilities and long-term damage; and, thirdly, preventing strokes altogether. Speed is of the essence with a stroke. A scan and early treatment within the first three hours can, as we have heard, make the difference between complete recovery, a lifelong disability or even life at all. For example, a brain scan will crucially confirm the diagnosis of someone admitted to hospital. For people with ischaemic strokes, swift thrombolysis or treatment with clot-busting drugs within three hours will significantly reduce the chances of dying, yet last year, only 0.8 per cent. of patients received thrombolysis.

I know that having a specialist stroke unit can do much to improve survival rates and recovery times for stroke patients. Commendably, early access to a stroke unit has improved significantly since 2006. However, in 2008, one quarter of patients were still not being offered this service—a service that I know, through personal experience, really can make a difference. As our population ages, the demand for these specialist units can only grow, so we must ensure that we can cope.

Having swift and high-quality stroke services from day one makes sense for our country's financial health, too. Caring for stroke patients currently costs the UK about £7 billion each year because of the long-term implications of a stroke and the detrimental effects of delays in treatment. Given that about a third of stroke survivors will be left with a moderate to severe disability, long-term social care is often a necessity, not a luxury. However, the Stroke Association says that rehabilitation and long-term care in the community is one of the weakest elements of a stroke survivor's pathway. Only around half of those who have experienced a stroke receive the necessary rehabilitation in the first six months following discharge from hospital, which falls to a fifth in the following six months.

The transition from hospital back to the community can also be extremely difficult. Not only do about a third of stroke survivors have communication difficulties—including, as highlighted in the Stroke Association's recent "Lost without Words" campaign, aphasia and speech impacts—but many experience a loss of confidence and independence as they struggle to regain their basic capabilities and rebuild their lives.

I am pleased that as part of the national stroke strategy, every local authority now receives a ring-fenced grant of around £100,000 a year for stroke services. However, I believe that the scheme is currently intended for only three years, so just as services are really starting to make a difference, I fear they may be shut down for lack of long-term financial support.

Finally, it is not enough to just to treat the symptom of the problem, as its cause is also important. We can reduce the likelihood of a stroke through preventive work on high blood pressure, irregular heartbeats and smoking, for example. That alone could prevent thousands of strokes each year, saving not only many families from having to watch a loved one suffer, but millions of pounds each year in care costs. For progress on stroke services, we must look carefully at three elements: the urgency of immediate health care; the long-term nature of recovery; and the opportunity to prevent strokes in future. Only if we can weave those into a more seamless approach, applied evenly regardless of where the patient lives, can we say that we are doing the best for the thousands of stroke sufferers each and every year.

3.45 pm

Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I appreciate being given a few minutes to contribute to the debate, especially as I missed the opening speeches, for which I apologise to those on the Front Benches.

I praise the Government for the improvement that they have tried to make in stroke care. The service in the NHS has been patchy and unsatisfactory for too long, and that is not what is needed in a modern health service. The national stroke strategy and the efforts in relation to hyper-acute centres are moving it in the right direction. A consultation process has taken place in London, including my area of north-east London. As part of that consultation, I have written to express my dissatisfaction about the way in which Whipps Cross hospital, in my constituency, was treated. It had a good case for being a hyper-acute centre—better than that for Queen's hospital and the Royal London, which were the ones chosen. The decision has been made on the basis of having two locations, and Whipps Cross has missed out unfairly in that regard.

A lot of money will be needed to bring Queen's and the Royal London up to a decent standard, and it is important that local hospitals such as Whipps Cross are not starved of moneys to run a good acute and TIA service. As money is pumped into the chosen centres, that is a risk. The Minister and NHS London must take on board the point that good local provision of acute and TIA services is still needed.

In my intervention on the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison), I made a point about ambulance services. Further improvements are needed to enable ambulance services to act promptly, and perhaps we need to look at traffic arrangements to ensure that ambulances get to centres on time for patients. The hon. Gentleman made a crucial point about the need for triage efficiency at A and E centres to deal with people as soon as they come in.

The hon. Gentleman also made a good point about acute services taking advantage of investment in telecommunication links—for instance, to enable people who have reported there to get treatment without having to go off to the hyper-acute centre. That needs improvement, and the expertise needs to be in local hospitals.

In north-east London, another plan being considered includes the option of a reduction in beds. That would be wrong for stroke care, because the beds are needed for rehabilitation of patients. In a proper stroke care model, there is no case for a reduction in beds.

Improved rehab and community stroke care provision, which remain weak, are needed. We have talked about NHS provision for stroke patients being patchy, but that in local authorities is even patchier: some are good; others are not, or they set high criteria to be met before giving help. A good look at what local authorities do is necessary, and they should be helped to provide such support in conjunction with the local NHS.

Only half of people get rehab in the first six months after having a stroke, which is too low a figure. As has been mentioned, the figure falls to a fifth in the next six months, which is not satisfactory. Only a third of patients in England benefit from early discharge support, which enables them to be rehabilitated in their own homes. That position needs to be improved substantially. I think I am right in saying that according to figures provided by the Stroke Association, only 12 per cent. of people who experience communication difficulties following a stroke are given speech therapy, and I believe that only 6 per cent. of people in London receive such support. Much more needs to be done in that regard.

My last point about rehab and community stroke care concerns people who suffer transient ischaemic attacks. Because of the fear that they will go on to suffer a major stroke, those people need to be seen within 24 hours, but I understand that at present only 45 per cent. of them are seen within that time. It has been estimated that if the figure were 100 per cent., which is the Government's target under the national stroke strategy, the number of people subsequently suffering full strokes would fall by as much as 80 per cent.

There are many issues surrounding hyper-acute centres, acute centres and TIA services in the more local hospitals. While the Government are pushing ahead with the centres and trying to improve the service, they must not lose sight of local provision, which I believe can play a very important role. By that I mean provision either by local hospitals or by local authorities in conjunction with the NHS. A great deal of credit is due to the Government, but there is much more to be done, and they should not forget that local role.

3.52 pm

Ann Keen: I thank all Members who have contributed to this important debate. I am particularly grateful for the way in which they congratulated the Government. Of course we all recognise that there is more to be done, but by bringing us together the debate has demonstrated that consensus across the House is a vital ingredient if we are to make progress on an issue as important as

[Ann Keen]

stroke. I acknowledge again the important work of the all-party parliamentary group on stroke and the contribution that it has made.

We are tackling all the work that needs to be done through the stroke improvement programme and the stroke care networks that it set up. The strategy is a 10-year plan, and there are no simplistic quick fixes to bring about the improvements that we want to see. We are the first to acknowledge that there is a long way to go.

In the short time available to me I shall respond to as many as possible of the points that have been raised, but if, as is likely, I fail to respond to all of them, I shall of course write to Members and ensure that all their points have been properly addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) shared her experience with us, telling us how stroke patients had been treated in the past. Let us ensure that it definitely is the past. I, too, acknowledge the work done by David Davis with the South East Coast ambulance service: it is well known and recognised in the Department.

London Members in particular, including my hon. Friends the Members for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) and for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter), have raised the scare stories that have been put about concerning closures that will not, in fact, take place, for instance at Barnet, Finchley and Charing Cross. I am more than familiar with that debate. No wonder the local community is engaged in the debate over Charing Cross. As long ago as 1992, when the then Conservative Government introduced the internal market, it was said that the market would decide whether Charing Cross or Hammersmith would stay open. There is no closure of Charing Cross; there will be no closure of Charing Cross. Imperial college is making sure that all the services that are coming from the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust are of the highest possible standard, but I note what has been said about the consultation, which ended on 8 May. Announcements are due on 20 July, I believe. If the process still needs to be looked and monitored in any way, I know that Members will make their views known to me. I will do my best to ensure that NHS London is aware of the debate and how that has progressed.

The hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) asked about the category for stroke. I have some information to share, but our discussions will continue. The software used to telephone-triage patients has recently been updated and is being rolled out across ambulance trusts. The new version includes questions based on the face, arm, speech test for stroke. Any patients with positive FAST symptoms will get a category A response, with a target to reach them within eight minutes.

We have heard many comments, including comments based on personal experience from the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark). I wish the family well. I am sure all of us would want to do the same.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) again pointed out with regard to the consultation the important work that takes place at St. Thomas's and at Guy's. I also commend St. Thomas's hospital, which Members consider to be their local hospital. The work that is done by Dr. Holmes and his team is excellent.

The hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) looked in particular at BME groups and how checks are being made. Efforts are being made to target that population in particular so that they go for those all-important health checks. Most Members have been gracious enough to say that that is good work. We are continuing down that line.

Points have been raised by Members covering many situations. Out-of-hours services were again raised by the hon. Member for Westbury. Imaging was mentioned, as was the importance of out-of-hours work and seven-day-a-week, 24-hour imaging. It is critical that that happens. We are looking at the development of the professions and the training that will be required to achieve that. Incorporating telemedicine in the way the hon. Gentleman mentioned is important. Many areas are starting to do that.

It is critical, as we continue with the 10-year strategy, that stroke is a No. 1 priority for the NHS, providing extra funding and establishing the local stroke networks. We are firmly aiming at a revolution in stroke services over the next few years, which I believe we will see. The House will work together on that important issue. Members will be aware that it is important that all the matters that have been raised are addressed, but the consultation, the reconfiguration and the specialist units will continue. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of stroke services.

3.59 pm

Sitting suspended (Standing Order No. 20).

Leeds City Council Bill (By Order)

Second Reading

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle), I wish to inform Members that I believe that it will be for the convenience of the House if we debate the Leeds City Council Bill, the Nottingham City Council Bill and the Reading Borough Council Bill together. I also wish to remind Members of the rulings I have given on the previous occasions when this substantive matter has been before the House. As three Bills that bear a considerable likeness to those before the House today have gone through, it seems to me to be in our best interests to make progress in the determination of the House's view on the Bills before us today so that there can, more or less, be parity of treatment in later stages of proceedings, as I understand that some of the promoters of the Bills may wish to propose detailed amendments if the House grants these Bills a Committee stage.

4.1 pm

John Battle (Leeds, West) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill follows on from other Bills that have already been debated at length. We have discussed the purposes of the Bills and the definitions of pedlars and street traders, and I do not intend to rehearse those arguments—I abide by your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) cannot be with us today as, sadly, he is unwell; we wish him well. He said in our last deliberations:

> "There is much in these Bills that is not controversial, is of common interest, and will be supported by Members in all parts of the House."—[*Official Report*, 21 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 197.]

I hope we can proceed in that spirit this afternoon.

On the Leeds Bill, the problems the city faces in these matters are similar to those faced by other cities with strong, dynamic centres: the difficulties of enforcing street-trading legislation against people who are, effectively, acting as street traders but under the guise of pedlars. These people cause great resentment among licensed street traders, who pay significant sums for their licences, and among retailers, who pay rent and rates. Following on from the publication of the Durham university report and, not least, taking into account the long deliberations in this House, Leeds city council suggests an amendment that will be formally made in Committee if its Bill proceeds today, as I hope it will. The amendment would enable pedlars to continue to trade in most areas of the city as long as they do not use stalls or other physical means of support; that is subject to a clear definition. That is a significant, practical and workable concession as a result of this House's deliberations and comments made in the other place.

I should like to refer to the results of two court cases against illegal street traders in the city of Leeds that came before magistrates on 15 May this year as examples that drive home why Leeds needs this Bill. The first offender did not attend the court and the case was proved. He was fined just £50, with £350 costs. The second offender attended the court and pleaded guilty to six counts of illegal street trading, but due to outstanding fines and costs for other matters he was given a conditional discharge for one year and no order for costs. From both those cases we could conclude that the current arrangements are ineffective and make it worth while for illegal street traders to carry on their activities because they are safe in the knowledge that any sanctions are unlikely to result in any financial deterrent.

In a similar case before the courts, proceedings were taken against an illegal flower seller who had seriously undermined the business of others in the city. It is therefore clear that businesses can be undermined by such illegal activities. Those examples illustrate that Leeds has an enforcement problem in relation to illegal street traders.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As always, the right hon. Gentleman is a powerful advocate for Leeds. I represent the neighbouring district of Bradford and in particular Shipley, and I have a concern. If this is such a big problem in Leeds and is to be dealt with at a Leeds level, what reassurance can be given that the problem will not simply move across the boundary to Shipley or the wider Bradford district? Would it not be better to tackle this problem from a national perspective, rather than looking after the interests of Leeds alone?

John Battle: I shall simply make two points to the hon. Gentleman. First, the Durham report suggests that there could be local, rather than national, solutions to this problem. We take that on board, and I respect the Durham report. Secondly, I walk regularly from my constituency to his, which is 12 miles along the Leeds and Liverpool canal. One has to go through my constituency and a few others to get to his, so if the problem were to migrate out of the city centre, it would come into my neighbourhood first. I have no intention of seeing the problem simply migrate, and I hope he would accept that reassurance.

The amendment to be proposed by Leeds takes on board the Durham research published earlier this year that suggests that there is no evidence to support the removal of the pedlars' exemption from the national street trading regime. This proposal aims simply to get a grip on the streets in the centre and those who, as it were, pretend that they are engaged in street trading when they are really engaged in peddling—the amendment will help to achieve that. I hope that Members on both sides of this House will give this modest Bill a fair wind and that the amendment might help others too. Let us get this Bill through its Second Reading and into Committee. Let us iron out the details and let us give the councils the enforcement help that they need, because that is the crucial issue at this stage.

4.6 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): First, may I make an apology on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), who is unwell? He has a detached retina, which has been incredibly painful. I know that he was very keen to be here to continue debating these matters, but unfortunately he is not able to attend. I can report that he is well on the way to recovery. Although it will not be much longer before he is back in the House, I am sure that we will all miss him in this particular debate.

I accept the ruling that you made at the start, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and my intention is not to delay the House unduly, but it is important to go through some of the

[Philip Davies]

arguments. It would be fair to begin by praising the people in Leeds and Reading, who have shown a great desire to compromise, as the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) said. They have looked at the issue, listened to the debate as the Bills have gone through the House and agreed to address some of the legitimate concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. I therefore see no reason why the Bills that relate specifically to Leeds and Reading should not be agreed to fairly readily.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for reaching out across the House. Does he acknowledge that, just as Labour Members are not seeking to restrict unduly the legitimate work of legal pedlars, we are deeply concerned about people using our ancient pedlar procedure as a flag of convenience to undermine legitimate traders who pay hard cash for their market stalls?

Philip Davies: I appreciate the points made by the hon. Gentleman, who is, again, a powerful advocate for his town. We may disagree on the extent of the problem. I still have a concern that this is a solution looking for a problem; I am not sure that there is a massive problem. In the spirit of co-operation, I shall certainly praise the approach that Reading has taken in finding a sensible compromise that not only suits its needs, but protects the legitimate rights of pedlars. Therefore, I see no reason why the Bills relating to Leeds and Reading should not be readily agreed.

The case is slightly different as regards Nottingham. My understanding—the hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) may well be able to help here—is that Nottingham has not been quite as keen as Leeds or Reading to co-operate and recognise some of the legitimate concerns raised, particularly those discussed in previous debates by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. I hope that before we finally consider whether to divide on the Bills, the hon. Member for Nottingham, East might offer some reassurance that Nottingham will go down a similar line to Leeds and Reading and will look to incorporate some of the compromises that those cities have adopted.

It is important to consider, albeit briefly, some new points that have emerged from the report published by the university of Durham, which was not available to the House when we previously debated these matters.

As the House will know, in paragraph 4 of a statement made by the promoters of the Bills they state:

"The arguments in favour of the Bills have been rehearsed at length in the debates on the Manchester, Bournemouth and Canterbury Bills, and they apply equally to Leeds, Nottingham and Reading."

In paragraph 5, they go on to quote the report from Durham university:

"Local authorities hoping to adopt legislation—whether a Private Act or the adoption of powers granted under the current Private Members Bill, if it becomes law—should provide a strong case to justify their adoption."

The promoters use that statement to argue against any further delay or debate about these matters, but the Durham university report, published since those Second Reading debates, makes it clear—in paragraph 212, page 70, if anybody has a copy of the report—that there should be a heavy burden of proof attached to those seeking private legislation

"to establish genuine evidence of a local problem insurmountable through the use of existing powers."

My contention is that no such case has been made for any of these cities, as far as I am aware.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton (Leeds, North-East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) quoted two recent court cases from 15 May, which, in the case of Leeds, prove that the sanctions against such street traders are simply not tough enough. The results of those cases prove that those sanctions act as no deterrent to such individuals. Has the hon. Gentleman been to the centre of Leeds on a busy Saturday, or even during the week, and seen some of the illegal street trading that is going on? He would realise, then, that this is not a solution looking for a problem but very much a problem that needs this solution.

Philip Davies: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but are one or two examples sufficient to make us go through the whole process of a new Act of Parliament and to justify the time that is being taken up? In answer to his question, I have regularly visited the centre of Leeds. In fact, in the eight years before I entered Parliament I worked in the centre of Leeds for Asda. I am well aware of the pros and cons of Leeds city centre, but I am not entirely sure that in the haste to get the Bills passed we have heard a coherent case about the problems encountered.

The Durham university report shows that the test for the legislation should be quite high. It appears to me, at the moment, that we are being asked to support the Bills on the basis of rather limited information. It would help if we had some firm evidence of the problems. I welcome the specific examples relating to Leeds that the right hon. Member for Leeds, West cited and I hope that we will hear the same points made about Reading and, in particular, about Nottingham. Given Nottingham's reluctance to compromise at all, above all else the council must demonstrate that it has a specific problem that cannot be dealt with under existing powers. So where is that evidence? Paragraph 211 on page 70 of the Durham university report states that those who took part in its public survey

"found genuine pedlars to be inoffensive and generally found their interactions with pedlars to be a positive experience."

The report does not seem to be stating that there is a great case for the Bills; it seems to be saying something rather different. It goes on to say that there is

"little sense in withdrawing the livelihood of such inoffensive and well-meaning traders",

and that the people surveyed

"greatly preferred pedlars to operate in the street, rather than door-to-door."

I am not entirely sure whether the Durham university report makes the case for the promoters of the Bills, as they try to indicate in their statement. The report concluded that

"restricting pedlars to door-to-door trading only would lead to a severe restriction on their livelihood."

Paragraph 6 of the statement from the promoters of the Bills says that

"evidence of the problems that the Bills seek to address will be provided to the committees of both Houses, and those committees will be able to test the case for the Bills in detail, to meet the recommendation in the Durham report."

That statement misunderstands the fact that it is imperative, before approval be given, in principle, to the restriction of rights of pedlars on Second Reading, that there should be

"genuine evidence of a local problem insurmountable through the use of existing powers",

as the Durham university report said.

I am not a big fan of the idea that we should say, "Let's agree to anything on Second Reading, because all matters can be decided, one way or the other, in Committee. If we think that we have got it wrong, we can change things then. We can always vote against the measure on Third Reading." That seems rather a strange approach to parliamentary scrutiny and parliamentary legislation, because on that basis, presumably no one would ever vote against the Second Reading of anything. We might say, "We can deal with all the issues in Committee," but that is not sufficient reason to support the Bills on Second Reading.

Nottingham is, it seems, the least keen to compromise. If there is such a serious problem in Nottingham that the city not only needs the Nottingham City Council Bill to be agreed to, but is not even prepared to compromise on it, presumably it should not be difficult to provide some cogent evidence and some good examples of where the problem is. However, the only evidence that the House has had drawn to its attention is on page 34 of the Durham university report, which shows that in 2006, in the whole of the Nottinghamshire police force area, only two defendants were found guilty of offences under the Pedlars Act 1871. In 2005, the number was seven, and in 2004 it was four. I would submit that that does not indicate that there is an issue of such gravity and importance that the House should spend, or perhaps waste, time and money considering legislation to cover Nottingham specifically.

All the evidence from the report, which the Government commissioned, suggests that there is not really much of a problem in Nottingham. Perhaps the promoters of the Bills—again, I look particularly to the promoters of the Nottingham City Council Bill—can let us have the details of whether the offences identified in the report took place in the city of Nottingham, or a different part of the Nottinghamshire police force area. That is not entirely clear from the information that we have. Perhaps they can also tell us what the nature of the offences was, so that we can have a basis on which to decide whether we need legislation for Nottingham. I genuinely think that the case has not been made. I have attended all the Second Reading debates that we have had on such Bills, and I have heard little from those who support the Bills about why the Bills are so good. The right hon. Member for Leeds, West probably made the best case that I have heard at such a Second Reading, even though his speech was incredibly brief. We need people to put forward a case before the House accepts it; it should not accept the proposals willy-nilly without even challenging whether they are necessary.

I come back to the point that I made in my intervention on the right hon. Gentleman. I represent a seat neighbouring Leeds, and I absolutely understand that his constituency is much nearer the centre of Leeds than mine is. If anyone were to move from Leeds to Shipley, they would certainly go through his patch. They may well not even come to Shipley, but go straight to Bradford or somewhere else. However, Members who represent neighbouring areas should be concerned.

On page 32 of the report, paragraph 94 deals with the number of complaints that have been made and the number of prosecutions that have taken place. The report examines the particularly high rate of guilty verdicts in Derbyshire and Kent under the terms of the Pedlars Act and states:

"In the latter case this could be the result...of an influx of pedlars from London, where the application of the London Local Authorities Act 2004 may have driven them out of the capital."

So the Durham university report clearly makes the point that by restricting the rights of pedlars in specific centres, there is a good chance that they will move to other parts of the country.

It seems perverse for us as a national Parliament to say it is all right to restrict pedlars in particular cities, but we are happy for them to move on to other cities nearby. That is a bizarre and divisive approach for a national Parliament to take. I know the point has been made before, so in line with Mr. Deputy Speaker's ruling, I shall not go over it, but that paragraph of the report is important for people living in areas neighbouring the cities under discussion. We should consider whether there is a national problem and whether we need national legislation, rather than adopting a piecemeal approach which may suit the centre of Leeds, Nottingham or Reading, but gives no thought to cities and towns nearby.

When we come to decide these matters, potentially in a vote, I see no reason why the Bills that relate to Leeds and Reading should not progress to Committee, even though we do not yet have the results of the Government's consultation. Those cities are keen to compromise, and in that spirit we should not unduly delay the progress of those Bills. I hope they will be able to proceed without the need for a Division.

However, the case for Nottingham has not been made. The Durham university report does not show that there is a particular problem in Nottingham, as opposed to any other part of the country. If the case is not made properly, the House should decide that that Bill does not deserve a Second Reading today.

4.23 pm

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East) (Lab): I shall be brief, as I recognise that the subject has been debated for almost a year. For anyone to pretend now that we have not heard all the arguments and that we need to produce details is nonsense. I do not need to produce any evidence of what is happening in Nottingham in order to make a decision.

Unlike the hon. Members for Shipley (Philip Davies) and for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), I live in Nottingham and I pass the streets where the problem occurs at least once a week. I can point to a place less than 100 yd from my office where illegal street pedlars are operating. They cause a fair amount of disruption in a pedestrianised area for shoppers passing through. Also, they are, in effect, competition—I consider it illegal competition—for those people who go through the proper procedures and

[Mr. John Heppell]

get themselves licensed as street traders. The legislation is needed and it is needed now. We are not in search of a problem; the problem exists.

I recognise—*[Interruption.]* There is plenty of evidence. I can show the hon. Member for Shipley photographs and information from the police. I accept that it is a minor problem and that it is not big crime, but to deal with it requires that we spend an awful lot of resources, time and ratepayers' money on trying to take people to court. There are so few prosecutions because the existing legislation does not allow us to take them to court. I do not understand why the hon. Gentleman cannot get that through his head.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heppell: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman has had a year to ask us to give way.

I know that you would rule me out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I started talking about amendments that were not on the Order Paper, so I shall discuss the Bill as it exists. However, I do not see a need to compromise with the hon. Member for Christchurch or the hon. Member for Shipley and go against the wishes of the people of Nottingham and, I suspect, the majority of the House. I find it strange that people who, for a year, have tried to wreck the Bill—there is no other way to put it—should now have some benevolent amendments to suggest. I have a suspicion that the amendments are intended to give them the opportunity to think of other ways of wrecking the Bill in the future, so I and the city and people of Nottingham are not willing to compromise with people from outside Nottingham. It is not their problem. The Bill is for local people and local representatives, who should know far better than anyone down here, and probably even far better than I do, what is required for Nottingham.

When the time comes, I shall move the Bill, and I hope that the House supports it. We have had a year's delay, which has been a great disadvantage to the people of Nottingham and it has created a great deal of expense. I hope that that is over now.

4.27 pm

Mr. Rob Wilson (Reading, East) (Con): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity finally to contribute to the Reading Borough Council Bill debate. Before I do that, I shall comment briefly on the Leeds City Council Bill, because my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) is unable to attend today's debate, as others have said, and I join them in wishing him a speedy recovery.

My hon. Friend has been extremely assiduous in his attendance at these debates and central to ensuring that the Bills have not gone through on the nod. He has spoken at length, demonstrating a great knowledge and understanding of the issue, and he has supported the underdog, as the pedlar can be assumed to be in this case. Although my hon. Friend's presence is missed today, at least by some of us, I hope to be able to further his hard work and to put on the record the current position regarding Leeds city council, before I move on to Reading.

My hon. Friend has led the opposition to an array of Bills that would otherwise seemingly have gone through without proper scrutiny. One of his main concerns has been the impact of the legislation on legitimate entrepreneurial pedlars going about their genuine business, and he has engaged with local authorities to try to reach agreements and ensure that the livelihoods of those pedlars are not curtailed unnecessarily. I can report that he, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said, has negotiated for some time and with some success with Leeds city council and Reading borough council on the narrow issue of pedlars. Both councils are to be highly commended for their sensible and extremely conciliatory approach towards finding common ground and an acceptable solution for all sides. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley said, that is very much at odds with the attitude of Nottingham city council.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch was recently provided with an amended version of clause 5, which Leeds city council and Reading borough council have proposed for consideration in Committee in relation to pedlars. The amendment is testament to my hon. Friend's ongoing and unwavering support for that small but nevertheless very important group of entrepreneurs.

On behalf of my hon. Friend, and for the purposes of this debate, I should like to read into the record the clause, as amended, which would form the new clause 5. Its sub-paragraph 2A states:

"Trading is carried on in accordance with this sub-paragraph if—

(a) It is carried out only by means of visits from house to house; or

(b) the following applies—

(i) all items used for any purpose connected with the trading are carried, without any other means of support, by the holder of the certificate during the time in which the trading takes place; and

(ii) the trading is not carried out in a prohibited street; and

(iii) the trading does not include the trading of tickets."

In the light of that major concession, my hon. Friend has asked me to express his gratitude to Leeds city council and Reading borough council for working towards a satisfactory solution. He was, however, of the understanding that sub-paragraph 2A(b)(ii), relating to trading in a prohibited street, would not be included in the amendment. I am sure that that will require explanation, or removal, in Committee. However, in the spirit of the negotiations, I should say that the inclusion of that provision should not hold up matters today; it would be a great shame if we held up the Reading Borough Council Bill or the Leeds City Council Bill today or later in the process.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the Nottingham City Council Bill could be opposed today, as has been said. That is mainly due to the council's failure to engage in negotiation and proper debate. It is a great shame that Nottingham should be singled out in this way, but I hope that the council will learn lessons from how Leeds city council and Reading borough council have behaved.

I shall now set out directly my points about Reading. Some of my hon. Friends have been extremely exercised by the Bills, and with good reason. I have listened carefully to all the arguments about the other Bills; I

think that I have attended all the debates apart from the revival debate, so I feel that I have a good grasp of what has gone on. It is a relief finally to get to the Reading Borough Council Bill after all those hours of discussion.

I was not consulted by Reading borough council in advance of its developing the Bill. The first that I knew of it was when I was lobbied by a council officer, not long before the matter arrived in this House. That is a little worrying and slightly strange; I suppose that it is partly due to Reading's consultation process not being as good as it should be.

Martin Salter: I do not wish to break this wonderful spirit of harmony that we are developing across the Floor of the House. However, does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that he is talking utter hogwash? I hope that that is in order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Gentleman had not pulled out of the joint liaison meetings that he and I used to hold regularly with Reading borough council, he would have been as consulted, as I was.

Mr. Wilson: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is talking about; as and when a matter comes up, I meet Reading borough council officers regularly. It is a little disingenuous of the hon. Gentleman to break the consensus of the afternoon just because I choose to handle my local constituency matters in a way that is appropriate for me. That does not stop him from handling his constituency matters through joint liaison meetings with the council if he wishes.

Neither side has made a completely open-and-shut case for or against the proposed changes, so I would like to take a little time to go through a few of the issues about Reading. In that way, at least they will be on the record and have what I would regard as a decent airing. From the previous debates on Bournemouth, Canterbury, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and so forth, we know that the control of street trading—mainly in relation to pedlars—comes under schedule 4 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982.

Like the other Bills, although bearing in mind the fact that they are not all exactly the same, the Reading Borough Council Bill would change the existing legislation that gives licences to pedlars to trade legally using a licence paid for by a £12.50 fee. Councils currently receive no business rates or licence fees from pedlars. In most local authority areas, the annual street trading fee is between £500 and £800, whereas pedlars continue to pay the much smaller fee of £12.50. It has been argued strongly, and with reasonable justification, that that represents an undercutting of other traders and is therefore unfair competition.

During one of my many walkabouts in Reading t[illegible] centre last year, I had the opportunity to speak to several local traders. One of them, Salim, expressed his annoyance that pedlars were able to sell their merchandise without paying the same fees that he paid, and also could bypass the local authority bureaucracy. Pedlars, by the nature of their occupation, are transient salespeople, and it is fair to argue that they contribute very little to the ongoing success of the local economy, unlike their registered street trader counterparts. Salim argued to me that this amounted to unfair competition. He told me that he was paying several thousand pounds a year for his pitch in the town centre as against the £12.50 per year paid by a pedlar. One can therefore understand his concern about competition. His family are providing local jobs and income for Reading, and they also run a local shop, while the pedlars clearly do not do that.

The main purpose of the Bill is to extend the scope of the council in regulating the provision of services on the street, as well as touting. However, extending the council's powers to regulate almost automatically makes me feel uneasy. I have always been of the view that less is more. The natural inclination of Governments local and national is to do more, to interfere more, and to involve themselves to a greater degree. That involvement usually makes matters worse rather than better, so it is rarely the right solution.

It is fair to say that in the past touting has been an important issue in Reading owing to the enormous numbers of young people arriving every year for the Reading festival, which takes place over the August bank holiday. I would thoroughly recommend it to hon. Members if they wish to visit Reading at that time. I believe that we have previously hosted the former Prime Minister's favourite group, the Foo Fighters, and the current Prime Minister's favourite group, the Arctic Monkeys. I use the word "favourite" in inverted commas, of course, because that information was briefed by Damian McBride, so one cannot tell what is true and what is not.

Martin Salter *rose—*

Mr. Wilson: If you are going to say something sensible, I will let you get up—go on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman of his language. He certainly should not be addressing the hon. Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) in those terms, let alone the Chair.

Martin Salter: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I certainly do not guarantee to say anything sensible, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way.

Would the hon. Gentleman like to remind the House that in the dark and dismal days of 1983 and 1984, it was a Conservative council in Reading that axed the Reading rock festival? It ill behoves him to be praying it in aid now.

Mr. Wilson: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman wishes to go back into ancient history. I am sure we could talk about lots of things from those times. As the current leadership of the borough council is about to become ancient history, perhaps in a few years we will visit that as well.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend talks about the problem that Reading has with ticket touting. I do not know whether he has read the reports by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and the Office of Fair Trading on ticket touting, which show that it is beneficial to the consumer. Is he saying that there is an objection to ticket touting, which could benefit Reading's residents by giving them an opportunity to go to something that they could not have gone to otherwise or to sell a ticket at a profit? Why is ticket touting a problem for residents in Reading? Is it not a benefit to them?

Mr. Wilson: I have not read the whole report, but I have read parts of it. My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, and if he bears with me I shall go through the points about ticket touting, and in particular the problems that the police say it causes.

I have been told that the activity of touts is of significant concern to the local authority, the local police and the Reading festival organisers alike. Richard Bennett, my local basic command unit commander, informed me during my consultation process on the Bill that the police have greatly limited powers in respect of illegal touting, but that the removal of such activity would reduce the risk to Reading festival-goers of buying forgeries, and also reduce the trade in stolen tickets. He said the following—it is a fairly lengthy quotation, but I wish to put it on the record:

"The individuals involved in touting include both legitimate traders and others who are involved in various forms of criminality. The police have very limited powers in respect of touting per se, but the removal of this type of activity would reduce the risk to Festival goers of buying forgeries and would reduce the trade in stolen tickets and wrist bands. There is Police activity in respect of both of these and we respond to the reports of thefts and forgeries accordingly but the existence of widespread touting provides a cover for the actions of criminals and we are responding to offences that have been committed rather than preventing them from happening in the first place."

The principle of good, proactive, preventive policing is something that we should all support.

Philip Davies: That is all very well, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend is making a far better case for Reading than anyone has even tried to make for Nottingham, but does he not accept that selling stolen or forged tickets is a criminal offence in itself and does not need any additional legislation? It is fraud, and it is theft. That is completely different from the selling on of legitimate tickets.

Mr. Wilson: Yes, I accept that there is a difference between those two things, but I wish to lay out my broad case, after which I shall be happy to give way again, if my hon. Friend wishes to intervene.

There is an absurdity in Reading borough council's position. As I understand it, it means that touting could be an offence in a designated part of Reading in my constituency, but not in Woodley or Earley, which are in my constituency but which fall within the borough boundaries of Wokingham borough council. I would be extremely interested to know where the demarcation would be for a touting offence to be committed, and how it would be policed. It is not clear from the Bill how the offence is intended to work or be used, so it is somewhat equivalent to a blank cheque. What offence would the laws be used for? Would they just be for the Reading festival, or would they be for sporting events such as London Irish rugby matches, or concerts at the Hexagon in Reading town centre? Ticket touting is not illegal elsewhere in the country, apart from, I think—

Philip Davies: Football.

Mr. Wilson: Apart from football matches. I thank my hon. Friend for confirming that. Where will the limits on the power be? It strikes me that the Bill would create an anomaly, which needs further explanation and probably further consultation and consideration before the Bill completes its passage.

To return to pedlars, Reading borough council argues that the small annual licence fee that they pay is not a reasonable sum in comparison with the sizeable annual rates paid by shopkeepers and permanent street traders. As I have said, that is a fair argument. A pedlar's licence can be obtained virtually anywhere in the country by anyone claiming to have a good character. Given the outdated nature of the original legislation, there seems to be significant room for people who are less than genuine to obtain a certificate from the police. The police have argued to me that they do not have the time or inclination to check a person's good character thoroughly, and that they can check only their criminal record. The system therefore has its limitations.

When I talked to a local pedlar, she had no idea that traditional street traders paid so much more than she did to trade on Broad street in Reading town centre. She suggested a change in the system whereby pedlars should be made to contribute more and street traders made to pay less for their licences so that a sort of equilibrium was reached. Although that is an honourable response, we were filming her at the time for a YouTube video on my website. I am not sure whether all the pedlars in the town centre agree with that point of view.

It is important not to vilify pedlars as glorified Del Boys, as some have done. Anyetta, the pedlar whom I met, was pleasant and helpful. She explained that she was simply trying to find ways in which to pay off her student loan, and peddling was only one of several jobs in which she was involved. It is an age-old, honourable business for those who choose to take it up. It is far from easy, but it is easy to criticise and castigate those who do it.

I also had the opportunity to speak to a shopper in Reading town centre, who had returned for the second week running to buy the same item from a local pedlar. When asked whether Broad street would be better off without such traders, he simply answered, "If you're walking down the high street and you see something you like, you make a choice." He implied that if the pedlars' merchandise is not of sufficient quality, discerning shoppers will vote with their feet and not come back. When I asked whether it bothered him that he might not be able to return the product the following week, his simple response was, "Woolworths might not be here next week." As it happened, Woolworths was not there the next week, so his example was fitting.

The local police force also has an important part to play. I met town centre police officer Rob Murray, who explained that, although illegal peddling is not a priority for the police, it is one of the main issues that the local neighbourhood action group consistently raises. Astonishingly, the group raises the matter as often as more serious problems, such as antisocial behaviour, rough sleeping in the town centre, which is increasing, and problems relating to the night-time economy, such as drinking and prostitution. Police enforcement exercises and prosecutions using CCTV have had limited effect. Sergeant Murray said that only seven prosecutions had been brought in recent years, which suggests that the existing legislation has not been thoroughly used.

I have also engaged in correspondence with the Berkshire West BCU commander Richard Bennett, who has informed me that the police are required to regulate pedlars while the local council regulates street traders. There is therefore a division of responsibility. The main conflict occurs when people use pedlar certificates to avoid the regulations and limitations placed on street traders. One of the main barriers to prosecution is the requirement on pedlars to keep moving. Is it sensible to ask our police to regulate that, and make them watch pedlars, who pull big trolleys up and down Broad street, waiting for them to stop for a period of time so that they can prosecute them? Is that not a waste of valuable time and resources, when the police could engage with far greater priorities for my constituents?

Phillip Davies: I believe that my hon. Friend's constituency is covered by Thames Valley police. According to the Durham university report, three people were found guilty of offences in 2006 under the Pedlars Act 1871, and in 2005, there were no prosecutions. Is my hon. Friend saying that there is a big problem but the police do not have the resources to deal with it, or that the conviction rate is so low because there is not that much of problem in Reading? Is he saying that there is a problem, but the police simply have no time or resources to tackle it?

Mr. Wilson: From my direct experience, I can say that there is a problem. There are a significant number of pedlars, but the difficulty is proving that they have committed an offence. One has to watch pedlars pulling trolleys up and down the street for a long time—several hours. There can be six, eight, sometimes even 10 big trolleys—some are the size of a street stall. That is not easy to police and one has to watch carefully if one wants the prosecution to stick. It is a question of resources, and I sympathise with the police's problem, which is why it is probably better for the local authority to play a bigger role in policing peddling.

Rather than expecting the police to take action against pedlars, it is much better that local authorities should have sufficient powers to regulate the offending behaviour themselves. Richard Bennett also reiterated the fact that neighbourhood policing is not intended to address all the licensing and trading issues that the local authority is meant to control. The local police response was that Reading borough council has a responsibility to create the sort of conditions in the town centre that will help legitimate street traders to prosper.

The upshot of the police response is simple. Although each case is complex, giving limited additional powers to other agencies, such as Reading borough council, would increase the range of options available to all authorities to put sensible measures in place. Although I would not wish to generalise about other forces across the country, Reading police made it clear that it sees the Bill not as being about handing over power to the council, but as being about sharing responsibility, which will make enforcement action much quicker and more coherent.

That is a logical and sensible approach. If the Reading Borough Council Bill is passed, it would undoubtedly free up the police's valuable resources to address more pressing issues in the Reading area. Steve Kirk, Reading's local police area commander, has also written in support of the application for a change in the legislation, which, as we know, dates back to 1871. He says that the 1871 Act is now simply not fit for the purpose of controlling the activity that it was originally intended to control.

I want to draw hon. Members' attention to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) in our previous debate. He advocated dealing with the problem through an overarching, national solution, rather than through piecemeal legislation. He rightly asked: if the Reading Borough Council Bill receives Royal Assent, what is to stop other local authorities from seeking the same legislation in their town centres? Not only would valuable parliamentary time have to be found for each separate Bill, but there would be a detrimental effect on the public purse.

That is a serious point, because I understand that each such Bill that is brought to Parliament costs about £100,000. I understand that a portion of the cost of the Reading Borough Council Bill is being funded by the business improvement district, but perhaps there are better ways of spending local taxpayers' money than bringing forward such Bills from across the country in the way that we are. I am digressing slightly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but with 50 Bills in the pipeline, a significant amount of public money would be needed to try to take them all through Parliament.

There is an argument that much of the current private legislation would be unnecessary if the Government agreed to a national legislative framework. Indeed, some hon. Members argued strongly for that in previous debates. That is one reason why I read with interest the research conducted by St. Chad's college, Durham, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley has referred, that was commissioned by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. That research raised several interesting points that are worthy of mention in this debate in relation to Reading borough council.

The research concluded that the scale of pedlary in the UK is relatively modest—although one would not know that from some of our debates—with an estimated 3,000 to 4,500 people being granted certificates by police forces across the country. The study found little evidence that certificated pedlars present problems in most city centres or that they are in direct competition with shops or street traders. The evidence also suggested that consumers value pedlars' presence in town centres and regard buying from them as a positive experience, as I found when I was out looking at the issue in Reading town centre. The study ended by stating that there is no need for national legislation, although solutions may be required to deal with local problems in particular areas.

Although I have already highlighted the legal anomaly that would arise because of the split of my constituency into two areas under separate local authorities, I believe that the conclusions of the report are sensible and fair. It says that the most common desire of local authorities is to be able to exercise more flexible and powerful sanctions, such as the ability to seize goods, issue fixed penalty notices and move traders on. However, the most evident concern related to the issues of obstruction or public safety caused by large numbers of street traders gathering in small areas, such as around football grounds or in city centres in the run-up to Christmas. My experience in Reading town centre is that large numbers of pedlars gather there with their big trolleys.

[Mr. Rob Wilson]

At certain times, that causes an obstruction and becomes a public safety issue for my constituents. There is therefore a need for action in that area.

Pedlars and police respondents to the research by the university of Durham also recognised the need to modernise and standardise, rather than repeal or replace, the 1871 Act. The inadequacies of the present system lead to inconsistency in enforcement practice between areas, which is exacerbated by a degree of ignorance among enforcement officers. I am sure that we all agree that greater clarity on this issue is needed for enforcement officers and pedlars alike. Interestingly, many of the local authorities that submitted evidence said that there were few, if any, difficulties stemming from illegal street trading. Only half the local authority respondents wished to change the existing legislation. This shows that, while certain councils—Reading included—wish to add to their statutory powers, many are happy with the status quo. Such information raises concerns about how important the new legislation really is. The Durham research concluded that possible changes to procedures relating to pedlars could include a more concrete nationally applicable set of definitions and guidelines relating to the issuing of certificates and to pedlars' activities, the redesign and standardisation of the pedlars' certificate and a greater burden on the pedlar to prove that they are a legitimate trader.

As a former entrepreneur—indeed, I still like to think of myself as a businessman—I strongly believe in the right to free, open and fair trade. I do not wish in any way to be seen to be against pedlars, because legitimate traders have a rightful place on every high street and add to the colour and diversity of our towns and cities. I do not want this legislation to drive out the genuine pedlar. However, I also do not believe that an ambiguity in the law should enable certain individuals to flout the rules at the expense of others.

Having aired these arguments and raised a few points of continued concern, I am going to support the Bill on this occasion, but on the clear understanding that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch—whose diligence must be commended—has brokered a very sensible compromise with Reading borough council. I congratulate the borough officer responsible, Clare Bradley, on agreeing a sensible compromise that all parties, including myself, appear to be happy with. That compromise will allow pedlars to continue to trade in the heart of my constituency, but without using the massive rolling trolleys to which I have referred. They are more akin to street traders' stalls on wheels, and they allow unfair competition. The pedlars will be able to trade in the more traditional way intended, and their enterprise will therefore be properly rewarded. I welcome the compromise and will therefore not detain the House any further.

4.58 pm

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): It would be churlish of me not to welcome the conversion of the hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson), but it is fair to say that it has been some time coming. The House has been entertained by hon. Members airing of the arguments on the Durham university report on many occasions. I welcome the fact that a compromise has been struck.

In the short contribution that I made earlier, I sought to highlight that there was no intention by Reading borough council or its officers—or, indeed, the business community of Reading—to restrict the more traditional role of the pedlar. There is, however, a problem with their wheeled monstrosities. I call them that because I have seen bogus pedlars trying to move them, and it can take four or five people to move them only a yard or two. Reports from the police and from the council officer concerned show that attempts to move these mobile stalls have resulted in goods and wares falling on to the ground in a chaotic manner.

My experience of trying to buy something from a pedlar is less romantic than that of the hon. Member for Reading, East. The last time I approached a pedlar in Reading town centre, I was just about to investigate his wares when he was arrested by the police and the Border and Immigration Agency and subsequently deported as an illegal immigrant. So there is, I am afraid, a direct parallel, with people using the pedlar certificate and the arcane provisions of the Pedlars Act 1871 as a straightforward flag of convenience—this applies in Reading and in other communities—in order to undercut, undermine and provide unfair competition for legitimate street traders.

It is worth reading into the record that the street trader fees currently levied for Broad street in the centre of Reading are £5,425 a year—and there were six of these at the time—so it equates to approximately £15 a day, whereas a pedlar's certificate can be obtained anywhere in the country, I believe, for about £12.50.

It is also worth stating, notwithstanding the Durham report—much of it does not apply to Reading because Reading does not restrict pedlars or street traders to the peripheries of the town centre—that the definition of a pedlar is somewhat arcane in itself. According to the definition in the 1871 Act, a pedlar is

"any hawker, pedlar, petty chapman"

whatever that means—

"tinker, caster of metals, mender of chairs, or any other person who, without any horse or other beast of bearing or drawing burden, travels and trades on foot and goes from town to town or to other men's houses, carrying to sell or exposing for sale any goods, wares, or merchandise, or procuring orders for goods, wares, or merchandise immediately to be delivered, or selling or offering for sale his skill in handicraft".

Now, about 130 years down the track, it is time to define exactly what we mean by pedlar in the modern context. I have to say that some of the starry-eyed romanticism I heard from the hon. Member for Reading, East—not so much in his recent contribution as in previous ones—is well wide of the mark.

When it comes to the Reading Borough Council Bill, I very much regret the fact that while making provision for important measures to support legitimate businesses in our communities, we are putting increasing and unnecessary pressures on the police, and so on and so forth. I worry that we are proceeding through the measure of a private Bill and I worry about all the expense, the trouble and all the parliamentary time taken up. However, we are where we are. As the former Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, once said, we have to live in the world as we find it, and the world as we find it in Reading is that we have a real, live problem that needs to be dealt with. I am thus delighted that it looks as though we are going to send this Bill on to due parliamentary process this afternoon.

The Bill is supported by the business investment district, which is a coalition of Reading street traders, by the Thames Valley police, by all parties on Reading borough council and particularly by the legal street traders who pay their dues. I seriously take issue with the hon. Member for Reading, East about the notion of consumer rights, particularly the idea that we should somehow frame a policy prescription for consumer rights on the basis that it does not really matter whether a chain store is going to be there today or tomorrow. If people are ripped off and sold dodgy goods, it is important that, wherever possible, they have the opportunity to take them back to the specific retailer. I very much regret the fact that Woolworths went under—it is no laughing matter—but I would certainly not frame public policy on the basis that because any business may cease trading at any time, we do not need to worry about the rights of consumers.

Mr. Rob Wilson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Salter: Very briefly.

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman, who I thank for giving way, is operating under a misunderstanding. If he read the *Hansard*, he would find that I was directly reporting the comments of one of my constituents rather than commenting about Woolworths myself, so he should correct his error.

Martin Salter: Frankly, if I read some of the speeches on this subject, I would lose the will to live, but I will certainly check the *Hansard* to ensure that I have not misrepresented the hon. Gentleman's laughing at the closure of Woolworths in Reading, which I think many people view as a matter of regret.

As to where we go from here, I hope that all these Bills will pass to their next stages and that we can continue the consensus that we have finally forged. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have sought to find a solution to a very real problem, albeit through a rather tortuous parliamentary route.

5.5 pm

The Minister for Trade, Development and Consumer Affairs (Mr. Gareth Thomas): This has been an interesting debate, which has carried on from previous discussions of similar private Bills.

I acknowledge the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (John Battle), who is a great champion of his city. He made a short, concise but nevertheless significant speech in favour of the Leeds City Council Bill, backed up by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton). My right hon. Friend noted in particular an amendment proposed by Leeds. I share his regret at the absence of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope)—I am not sure he will welcome the Government wishing him well in his recovery, but I do so nevertheless.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made a series of interesting points, and has clearly been doing his research. As part of that, I hope he is now reading the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform website—a confession to which he alluded in previous debates—more thoroughly and rigorously. I am happy to be corrected by him, but he seemed to argue that either there is a national problem in relation to pedlar legislation and the way in which pedlars are handled or there is not. Although I acknowledge the number of private Bills that have been brought to the attention of the House, the number of local authorities across the UK that have not sought to introduce legislation on the issue to date is also worth noting.

There has been growing pressure on the Government to consider the issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) has been particularly astute in his consistent lobbying of the Government to take action. As the House knows, we have responded to such calls.

Philip Davies: Does the Minister not acknowledge the domino effect as local authorities request legislation to sort out their city, and then other local authorities find the problem transferred to them and also request legislation? Does he not agree that national legislation would sort out the problem once and for all?

Mr. Thomas: I do not necessarily accept that that is the case. Where local authorities face problems, they have sought a private Bill in the usual way to address local issues. I also acknowledge that a growing number, albeit a minority, of local authorities have been concerned about how pedlar legislation has been used, and have made the case for reform. In that spirit, we have sought to conduct the research led by Durham university, to which I will refer in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) again made a passionate and powerful speech in favour of the Reading Borough Council Bill. The hon. Member for Reading, East (Mr. Wilson) also made a thoughtful and considered case for the Bill. I was almost sympathetic to his plight as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West intervened on him: his interventions made me grateful that he continues to be on my side. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) also made a passionate defence of his city's need for the legislation under consideration.

For the convenience of the House, let me set out the Government's updated thinking on the issues. In March, during the revival debate on these and three other private Bills, I confirmed that my Department would undertake a consultation this summer on street trading and pedlary, as a result of the research findings set out in the Durham university report, which my Department commissioned last year. As I have said, we hope to launch the consultation by the summer recess. Details will appear on the DBERR website in the usual way, and no doubt the hon. Member for Shipley will be one of the first to spot them.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): I welcome the consultation on the Pedlars Act. May I ask the Minister, however, whether in the future he might recognise that £100,000 is a relatively high threshold, and that nothing should necessarily be read into the fact that local authority nuisance has not reached the threshold of £100,000-worth of expenditure?

Mr. Thomas: I acknowledge the cost of bringing a private Bill to the Floor of the House of Commons. One of the reasons why the Government commissioned the Durham university research, and one of the reasons for the consultation that we are launching in the summer, is the fact that we received a number of representations

[Mr. Thomas]

from local authorities and hon. Members about the need for the Government to review this issue nationally. We have sought to respond to the concerns of the House. I am sure that, in his more generous moments, the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that we are a listening Government and have listened to the concerns of the House in this instance.

As the House will recognise, the activities of unlawful street traders can adversely affect the livelihoods of licensed street traders, certified pedlars—those acting in accordance with the Pedlars Act—other retailers and consumers. We therefore strongly support the efforts of local authorities and their enforcement partners to use the powers at their disposal to regulate unlawful traders' behaviour.

In due course, the street trading and pedlary consultation will seek to explore three main themes. First, it will seek views on options concerning the scope for providing extra enforcement powers along the lines of those which are subject to these Bills—in particular, fixed penalties and powers of seizure and confiscation to enable more effective control of illegal street traders. Secondly, it will seek views on the potential for updating the Pedlars Act to bring what is a 19th-century framework firmly into the 21st century. We will consider the future of the form of the pedlars' certificate. We will consider which should be the issuing authority if it is not to be the police, as is currently the case. We will consider how to maintain the national nature of a genuine pedlar's permission to trade while still meeting the valid wish of some local authorities to be able to control the level of trading activity in relation to special events or in particular areas where too much trading has an adverse effect.

Thirdly, we will seek views on draft guidance that offers clearer advice on what is permitted and what is not. We will also seek views on the future position of pedlars of services in the wake of alterations in the course of implementation of the services directive. We will seek to reach the pedlar community. We will also work with trading standards and other local authority officers in considering how the options before us might be usefully developed, and we will, of course, want to hear the views of the police.

A range of other key stakeholders are already considering what should be done. The National Association of British Market Authorities will hold a seminar later this month. As we have heard, some local authorities whose Bills are before the House have already discussed with a number of hon. Members their experience of the current legislation and their appetite for more change, and I understand that a number of pedlars also wish to share their experience of the current position.

I welcome the work of those other stakeholders, which we shall want to use in our deliberations. We shall also give further consideration to the debates on these Bills that have already taken place in the House, and those that will take place in the future, in deciding what action to take. I commend the Government's neutrality on the Bills to the House.

5.15 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I commend the industry and efforts of the different local councils who have brought the Bills to the House. As hon. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned, the process of bringing a private Bill before the House is expensive, quite complicated, pretty time-consuming and rather arcane.

It is worthy of note that these local councils have found their way through the different thickets and underbrush of parliamentary procedure to get to this point. It has been an achievement. It is also worth mentioning that a number of other local authorities may be deterred from bringing such Bills to the House because the process is so complicated and relatively expensive. That point was made by the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats.

My constituency has similar problems with pedlars. Every autumn, the Weston-super-Mare carnival is held—carnivals are a wonderful west country, Somerset tradition. On a Monday evening in late autumn, a colourful and loud procession will wend its way through the streets of Weston-super-Mare, with a lot of people turning up to watch. I have had repeated representations from the organisers of the carnival, who perform that task in their free time, as volunteers, to raise money for a variety of good causes. They are concerned that, for that night, Weston-super-Mare is besieged by pedlars from throughout the country who come to sell their wares. The organisers are concerned that money spent with those pedlars might otherwise be spent or donated to the various good causes that benefit from the carnival. People are deeply concerned about that lost revenue.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I support the hon. Gentleman strongly on this matter. As he knows, the circuit includes many Somerset towns—no one outside Somerset has any concept of the scale of Somerset carnivals—so pedlars are a real problem throughout the county. As he knows, his predecessor tried hard to get the law changed to deal with the problem. I hope that through the process of private Bills, the Government will eventually recognise that the prevalence of pedlars is a problem for the charitable sector as well as for commercial traders.

John Penrose: I am grateful for my fellow Somerset MP's support. What we have described is a microcosm of a much wider problem. My local council has considered bringing one of these Bills to the House but after extensive consideration it has so far decided that it cannot justify the expense, for the reasons that have been mentioned by hon. Members on both sides of the House. I compliment those councils that have promoted the Bills before the House today. They have managed to wend their way to the Floor of the House but I suspect that a large number of other councils are either actively considering doing the same, or have so far been dissuaded because of the cost of the process. It is worth putting that point on record.

As we have heard, there are arguments about the merits and demerits of pedlars. It is worth saying that no one is suggesting that legal street traders and pedlars may not necessarily be a good thing—in fact, they are closely regulated and it is accepted that they can bring a useful buzz and colour to the streetscape and town centre, and can be an important aspect of a shopping centre's life and fizz. However, the problem is with the unregulated or perhaps the rogue examples of the trade.

My party shares the Government's approach of maintaining a careful and studied neutrality on individual Bills brought before the House by individual councils. It would be wrong to adopt a national position on such special local Bills, but our overarching view is worth putting on the record. We think that it is important that the existing legislation is subject to some national reform and examination, especially given the fact that we have all these Bills coming through to the Floor of the House in a rather solemn procession. Clearly, that cannot be a sensible or useful use of this Chamber's time and of the extensive resources that have to be spent in bringing each one of those Bills separately and in sequence to the Floor of the House. That cannot be a sensible use of anyone's time or resources.

That is why I was extremely pleased to hear what I understood to be the beginnings of Government movement, and I just want to make sure that that is clearly put on the record. I think we heard the Minister say that the Government will now be considering, and consulting on, extra enforcement powers, clearer guidance and advice, and changing the Pedlars Act 1871—after 130-plus years, I suspect that may very well be sensible—not only to update some of the existing provisions, but to investigate whether it should cover services as well as goods. Everybody will broadly welcome that. If it avoids the need for any other local councils to bring yet more of these Bills, it will make everybody in all parts of the House happy—including my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), whom we all wish well in his recovery from his detached retina. I assure the House that my party will be carefully watching the Government's progress in this matter, and will try to make sure they have all the necessary support if they are going to simplify processes so that we do not need a similar procession of such Bills in future.

5.21 pm

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): We have been generally supportive of reform in this matter. It is obvious that there are widespread problems with pedlary, as the situation at Somerset carnivals shows, and it does not require a lot of evidence. We can, I think, take at face value the tales of, for example, the hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) and the right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle) that there is a specific problem in their areas. It will clearly create unfair competition if in Reading, for example, people have to pay £5,000 a year for a licence, but for £12.50 people can wander around all over the place.

We should give more attention to the process whereby the law gets changed and how we have ended up with a sequence of Bills and to the fact that, until this point, the Government have not recognised the need for reform. To that extent, we greatly welcome the Government's consultation on the issue of pedlary. A law put in place when people did not have easy transport around the country and would wander around with their goods is now undermining the regulation of the street scene. Street traders are very important, but when people come in to localities from different areas, that causes a difficulty.

Oddly enough, in my constituency, we have moved down the route of discouraging cold calling as well, which points to another issue that should, perhaps, be looked at in the consultation. Given that distraction burglaries are a great concern in Birmingham, Yardley, we might need to look at that wider issue as well.

The Reading Bill contains interesting provisions relating to touting. It refers to:

"Any person who, in a place designated under this section, importunes any person by touting for a hotel".

It would be interesting to know how the courts would interpret that. Selecting the word "importunes" rather than "solicits" implies that somebody is being asked more than once. If we are to develop a framework for dealing with such issues, which we have supported all along, the Government's consultation should also consider what might need to be done about touting, and whether that should be addressed in relation to soliciting or importuning, which is the term used in the Bill. It might be difficult to secure prosecutions if somebody says, "Well, I only asked them once", given what, on the strict dictionary definition of the term used, the measure in the Bill means.

I had great encouragement from the hon. Member for Nottingham, East to give a very long speech, but I am not sure that I entirely understood his semaphoring so I shall stick to talking about the basic issues, as I have so far. We support these private Bills, but in future, we will have to look at how legislation can be changed by public demand without that having to be agreed by a Department, because it is clear from the Bills' progress that the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform is resistant to necessary change. However, that resistance is gradually eroding as it is obvious that so many local authorities have reached the threshold where they are willing to spend more than £100,000—the £100,000 merely relates to the costs paid externally and there are obviously internal costs too.

In the context of reform within this House and how legislation is generated, there must be a better mechanism for reviewing how to alter things, so that changes do not come just through the civil service, but can be developed outside this House and promoted in this House more effectively in mainstream business. That is different from everything coming along with the bus, as it were, with a standard Bill, on whatever it might be, generated out of the civil service. Resistance from within a Department—we are pleased to see it ebbing away on this occasion—causes the difficulty of a sequence of expensive private Bills and potentially a situation where we drive a problem around the country as we deal with it in each place. I must welcome the fact that the Government have recognised that and are moving to consultation. Within that consultation they should also examine the issue of touting, because if Reading feels that it is worth examining, it is important that we deal with the wider point. On that basis, we will be supporting these Bills.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed.

NOTTINGHAM CITY COUNCIL BILL (BY ORDER)

Bill read a Second time and committed.

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL BILL (BY ORDER)

Bill read a Second time and committed.

PETITION

European Working Time Directive (Fire Fighters)

5.26 pm

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): By the leave of the House, I beg to lay a petition regarding the UK opt-out from the EU working time directive. The directive would pose a threat to the retained firefighting system in the UK. The petition has been collected by the residents of Brecon and Radnorshire and contains more than 1,000 names.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of residents of Brecon and Radnorshire, and others,

Declares that the European Parliament's proposed abolition of the opt-out from the European Working Time Directive poses a threat to the retained fire fighter system in the United Kingdom; and further declares that the United Kingdom should maintain its right to opt out of the European Working Time Directive so that the retained fire fighters are able to continue with their commitment to the vitally important fire service.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to do all in its power to preserve the right to opt out and to keep our rural fire stations open.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000377]

Regional and Local Government

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Ms Butler.)*

5.28 pm

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): I am enormously pleased, and I am sure that the Minister is delighted, that we have such a lot of time to debate this important issue—I was very much hoping that the House would have sufficient time to debate Government policy on regional and local government powers. I know that the Minister has received from my office an essay that I published three months ago, which, among other things, set out what I hope will prove to be a positive and constructive contribution to the debate on the new structure for local government in Cornwall. As a member of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, which two weeks ago published its own report on the balance of power between local and central Government, I think it is a timely moment to debate this matter. Given that we are on the eve of important elections across the country—not only the European but the local elections—I am sure the Minister would like to take the opportunity to set out the Government's vision. I hope he will accede to some of the ambitions I shall be highlighting and the points I shall be making.

I am sure that the Minister will have enjoyed reading the 21-page essay that I sent him, and he will have noticed that I attempted to raise the debate above what has often been, in many local areas, best described as petty recrimination and party political tribalism of the worst type. It is unfortunate that so much of the debate at a local government level often resorts to that. That is no less the case in Cornwall than in many other parts of the country. I believe that it is partly a reflection of the relative powerlessness of local people when it comes to considering what local authorities can achieve.

I often describe local authorities not as local authorities or local government as such but as local agents of central Government, given the constraints and straitjackets in which they operate as regards their duties and powers and the targets and responsibilities that are placed on them. In effect, the decisions that they take are often de facto taken remotely in Whitehall or in Government offices. In fact, the latitude available to local authorities is restricted when it comes to their ability to vary the way they deliver a number of Government services. I do not say that simply to make a point against the Labour Government, because I think this trend has been going on for some time and, to be fair, it has been happening across parties. It is part of the dynamic of the relationship between central and local government that we all need to be honest about.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He is making his case incredibly well. Does he agree that that problem is best evidenced in planning, where local councils are often put in an invidious position and end up having to approve developments that they and their local communities do not want? They have no choice because of the plethora of guidance that comes down from central Government.

Andrew George: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman but, I think that the one area where a certain amount of power is available to local authorities, in which—surprise, surprise, perhaps—there is often more competition among selected members to go on to the relevant committee, is planning. In fact, the planning committees make decisions on the economic, residential and other development of their communities. That happens very much at a local level and is, admittedly, site-specific and is applied case by case, but that committee has more power. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that that power is not sufficient to allow the committee to direct development in the way I believe local authorities should be entitled to, but planning is probably the area in which local authorities have most power. If the hon. Gentleman reflects on that, he will see that it means that in all other areas of local government, powers are extremely restricted.

It is also worth reflecting for a moment on the Government's record on regional government and regional government powers. Although I do not intend to take up a lot of time on this issue—it is one that has been widely debated on many occasions—it is perhaps worth reflecting that the Government set out with an honourable objective, which was to try to establish regional government across the country. They rightly set out to deliver devolution in Scotland and Wales and, as part of the peace process, in Northern Ireland. They set out to do so in London, too, of course. That was an appropriate approach to the concept and policy of delivering devolution across the UK.

Of course, devolution is a process rather than a single event, and those who understand how the process works recognise that. When addressing the issue of the vacuum or lack of devolved power in the rest of the country, the Government seemed to forget that the fundamental principle of devolution is that it is a process of letting go, rather than holding on for dear life. I would have hoped that, after 12 years in power, the Government might have had the opportunity to reflect on that but, disappointingly, so far they seem not to have done so.

I say that devolution is a process of letting go rather than holding on, because the Government appeared to take the view that they should define the boundaries of the so-called regions—I call them Government zones—in which powers were supposedly to be handed down. They also set the timetable by which they would deliver those powers. They set out the basis on which the north-east referendum of 2004 would be held. In all senses, the devolution process was very much led by central Government.

I do not come from the north-east; I come from the diametrically opposite end of the country. I come from the far west of Cornwall—the bottom left-hand corner, as it were. If the Government said to Cornwall, "We'll offer you regional government based on these boundaries, these powers and this timetable. Now this is the question: do you want it or not?", I am afraid that a lot of people would be rather sceptical and would think there was a centrally driven agenda. The Government have retreated into a rather unhappy netherworld, having established Regional Select Committees, for which there is no cross-party consensus or support. Those Committees are a means of replacing the unelected regional assemblies, which the Government are to abolish; that is about as far as they have managed to go in the devolution of regional powers.

In some senses, in some parts of Government there is a passion genuinely to deliver regional powers—there is recognition that the state is far too centralised. I hope that the Government will open the issue up again, and not come at it from the angle of believing that they can control the agenda in the way they have done. They should set a menu of powers and allow local authorities themselves to decide, perhaps in the same way that they are enabling that to happen through the multi-area agreements. However, I do not think those agreements go far enough, or will in any sense deliver what I believe the Government should deliver.

The Government should allow communities to come together to draw up their own plans for devolved regional settlement, for taking powers away from the quangos, and for allowing decisions instead to be taken by directly elected representatives of local communities, who can shape and steer the ways their communities develop. If the Government were to allow that to happen, it would be easier to recognise that local government itself could be developed following the same principle—the principle that decentralisation is not just a process but is about letting go rather than holding on to the agenda. I hope that that is what the Government will do.

As the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Khan), knows full well, Cornwall county council and the six district and borough councils in Cornwall went through a painful process, which involved a lot of recriminatory and unsatisfactory debate of the kind that I described to him a moment or two ago, in the lead-up to the establishment of a single unitary authority. Elections to that authority take place tomorrow.

Cornwall put forward two possible patterns for the delivery of a single unitary authority, which I know the Government considered carefully. One proposal was for a single unitary authority with 18 local delivery areas or community networks; the other proposal was for six local delivery areas, reflecting the existing six districts. Both were unitary options. They seemed to be in conflict with each other, but in many senses they were similar bids.

When it came to a decision on the option that the Government went along with, which was the county council's version of the single unitary authority, the debate was not very satisfactory. Many people in Cornwall felt that there was insufficient consultation. Those who were unsuccessful at the district level, if I may say so, engaged in a recriminatory political campaign to try to stop the initiative going through.

Many of us felt that the process may be worth pursuing if the Government were prepared to give Cornwall some real decision-making powers, but as the negotiation went on it became clear that the Government would not offer Cornwall any meaningful additional powers. It would be the same, but larger, agent of central Government as before, when there were seven authorities. That was a great disappointment.

In the vote on the order last year, I voted, with great regret, against the proposal. I felt that it should be taken away and worked on again, with the Government contributing a great deal more to the process of establishing

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a stronger tier of government in Cornwall. However, the decision is taken not in Cornwall but in Parliament, and Parliament saw to it that the order went through, so the unitary authority is being set up. As the Minister knows, it has established its interim board, which has been in operation since 1 April, and the first elections for 123 members will take place tomorrow.

In spite of having been opposed to it, I want to ensure that the council is a great success. The Government need to recognise that, underlying a rather frustrated local government sector in Cornwall and a rather disenchanted electorate—we will see by Friday evening what result they produce for us—there is great ambition for Cornwall. In any area there is the silliness of the extreme fringes, but Cornwall, with its own language, history and strong constitutional status on account of the Duchy, has strong arguments to promote its diversity and cultural strength. It is a case not of Cornwall wanting to cut itself off from the rest of the country and to become rather nationalistic and narrow, but of Cornwall wanting to enter into the celebration of diversity in the UK and the wider world, but it can do that only from a position of strength, not if it has little latitude to take decisions.

Cornwall's great ambition is to be the United Kingdom's green peninsula. We already have more wind turbines, the Government support the wave hub experiment off the north coast of my constituency, and in Cornwall there are some excellent companies operating in the geothermal and renewables sectors. In Cornwall, there is a lot of imaginative thinking and there are many excellent people to drive that agenda in the county itself. There is a real passion and ambition to champion social justice and to create the conditions for a more equal society. There is an ambition also to put our young people at the centre of policy making, but it is currently difficult to do so given the resources that are available and the way policy is directed from the centre. The careers service and other services are not under local control.

There is an ambition to build a powerful brand for Cornwall, but that is difficult when the regional development agency covers the Government zone of the south-west, stretching from the constituency of the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) down to my constituency, which includes the Isles of Scilly. The south-west, as a Government zone, really has no brand. There are many lovely places in it, and it is worth their establishing their own brands, but there is no such thing as that south-west. It has been difficult to generate any enthusiasm or support from the regional development agency for something that it fears is about promoting a brand within the brand that it wants to create for that invented region.

We also have an opportunity to rediscover the distinctiveness of Cornwall, to build on the cultural and environmental strengths of the county, to be outward-facing not inward-looking and to develop our communications and maritime industries. When the Government look at transport both in Cornwall and, strategically, within the RDA zone, they see the area as some kind of landlocked appendage and worry how much tarmac there is and whether the roads and the rail services are adequate, as if all communications in Cornwall travel just east to west. In fact, Cornwall is almost surrounded by sea and, seen from a much wider perspective, faces out to a much wider world. It has maritime connections, is three miles from the busiest shipping lane in the world, has the second-largest natural harbour in Europe, at Falmouth, and so on. All that potential is being ignored, and Cornwall is simply seen as a pleasant holiday destination.

Cornwall should have the power to shape those matters and its own future. After all, who should decide how many homes are built in Cornwall? The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned planning powers, and I know that they are highly contentious both in the House and in local authorities. The Government want to develop 3 million homes by 2020, but Cornwall has undergone such development. We have not tried to resist it, because the county is one of the fastest growing places in the country. It has had the third fastest housing development since the early 1960s. In the past 40 years, Cornwall has more than doubled its housing stock, yet over that period the housing problems of local people have become, if anything, far worse. Simply building houses—heaping up thousands of houses—is not the answer. As far as the plans for Cornwall are concerned, the decisions are taken outside the county. The south-west assembly, as it called itself before it was abolished, was engaged in the process of deciding what the regional spatial strategy should look like. It came up with a figure, which was then overruled by the Secretary of State; one wonders why it bothered in the first place.

Cornwall now has to have 70,000 houses during the 16 or 17 remaining years of the plan. However, having experienced the highest housing growth anywhere within the Government zone, and very high housing growth in the context of the UK overall, we in Cornwall know that simply adding all those houses will not address housing need. We need to establish policies that enable local authorities—in Cornwall's case, the local authority—and local communities to drive a development process that meets local social housing need.

In my part of the world, a large proportion of properties are second homes; 10 per cent. in Penwith district are, for example. I have nothing against the people who own those homes, but they clearly have an impact on local people's ability to purchase a property locally. Just last year, I did a survey of estate agents in my constituency, and it showed that three times as many properties were sold to second-home buyers as to first-time buyers. That is the pattern in the housing market of my area. As I have said, simply building more houses is not the answer. People who want to buy second homes will clearly be better able to buy those houses than local people on local wages—in Cornwall, we have the lowest wages in the country. We have to do something rather more sophisticated than simply dumping 70,000 houses in Cornwall. The four western districts of the county are already among the four most densely populated rural districts in the Government zone, so it is not as if a wealth of development land available is available.

Who should decide how many homes should be built in Cornwall? Should it be a Government quango or people elected to the local authority? If we ask people there, they will say, "We want a say on this matter." I am talking about Cornwall, but if people in any community are asked whether a Government board or people who represent the local community should decide whether 15 per cent. of money spent on elective surgical work

should be diverted to private hospitals rather than NHS hospitals, the answer will be clear. People believe that decisions about their local NHS should be made by local people, not by a process that comes down from central Government.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): I am listening with considerable interest to the hon. Gentleman's reasonable and measured analysis of the situation, particularly in Cornwall. I generally agree that it is important that as much as possible should be devolved to local councils and communities, but does the hon. Gentleman not think that there is inevitably a tendency for local county councils to say, "Not in my back yard"—particularly when it comes to issues such as housing? There needs to be another regional tier, below central Government, that tells local councils that they are obliged to play their part in providing land for housing, although they may wish to say that they do not want that housing in their areas.

Andrew George: That is a fair point. The nub of the issue, however, relates to the blunt instrument of simply dumping housing numbers, irrespective of local circumstances or the failure of a policy of simply putting market housing in an area, a policy which has clearly failed to deliver the goods. If the local authority were to allow very high numbers of people on to local housing waiting lists but fail to address, through developments, an unmet demand within the local community for housing, that would clearly be a dereliction of its duties. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a role for central Government in bringing pressure to bear on local authorities that fail to address those issues. We know that merely saying in Cornwall's case, "You must find the land for 70,000 houses," will not in itself deal with the problem that we are all most concerned about—those in the community who are inadequately housed or not housed. The failure lies in using the blunt instrument of high housing numbers.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am sorry to have missed some of the debate, but I have been in Select Committee.

Is not the provision of public housing the best way for central Government, and indeed regional government, to play a part? All the evidence shows that the right relationship between public housing and private housing leads to a much better housing model. What has been seriously wrong for the past 20 years is the belief that the private market can do it all. That approach has failed, and until we get back to proper public housing provision, it will continue to fail. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Andrew George: I do, to a certain extent. Certainly, in my own part of the world the best social housing, for want of a better expression, in terms of affordability, comprises the houses that were built by local authorities in the 1930s and 1940s. If there is any clear preference among local people when they are looking for housing, we generally find that it is centred on those estates. In some cases, those properties have gone through various modernisation programmes. They provide housing for local people that is not only decent but decently spaced, of a reasonable size and with reasonable gardens. Since that time, we have built at a much higher density. Before I became a Member of Parliament in 1997, I worked in the charitable sector to meet local housing need. I am not opposed to achieving that by deploying the talents and abilities available in the housing association and charitable housing sectors. That diversity can address housing needs. I agree that there are many lessons we can learn from the activities of the past and what local authorities were able to achieve.

Let me turn to the document. Without poring over it in tedious detail, I am sure that the Minister will have lapped up every single word. He will have noticed that, like the report by the Communities and Local Government Committee, "The Balance of Power", it lists the extent of the constraints that are placed on local government—for example, the tendency to legislate as a first response; the detailed descriptions associated with legislation; and the proliferation of targets and performance measures, which although reduced have been consolidated. It shows that for 80 per cent. of the time that local authorities spent on performance reporting, they were reporting upwards to Government rather than to the local electorate. There is also the role of inspectorates, backed up by the threat of intervention by central Government.

There is a classic example of that in my constituency on the Isles of Scilly. There are various requirements from inspectorates in respect of a number of the statutory duties performed by the council of the Isles of Scilly, which provides services to 2,000 people on the five inhabited islands. The cost of the best-value analyses that inspectorates require, for example on grave digging, street lighting or trading standards services, is often greater than the cost of providing the service itself. That shows the rather bizarre circumstances in which local authorities sometimes find themselves.

There is the centralisation of financial arrangements and controls, the movement of functions away from local authorities to local appointed boards or quangos accountable to central Government and the proliferation of requirements on local authorities to submit plans to central Government. All those things put constraints on local authorities, and the only thing that local authorities get back is the opportunity to enter into a competition for central Government funding to deliver what should be core public services. Those services could include early years support through Sure Start, economic development through the market and coastal towns initiative, or community cohesion and development through the neighbourhoods for change programme, the parish path partnership or the play pathfinders scheme. That is not an attack on the current Government, because the same approach was taken by the previous one as well, but all those things are constraints on local authorities and a way of making them dance and pirouette for money to deliver what should be core services in any case.

I want to get across to the Minister my commitment to the principle set out in the Communities and Local Government Committee report, in which I had a hand. In paragraph 4 of our conclusions and recommendations, we advanced the principle that

> "decisions which primarily affect one area to a significantly greater extent than others, should be taken within that area and not outside it"—

in other words, the subsidiarity principle. Local authorities taking such decisions should, of course, be able to

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demonstrate that where there is a spill-over impact on other areas, they have taken reasonable steps to take account of that impact. That principle—that decisions affecting one area and no other should be taken in that area—is clearly not being delivered through the Government's attitude to local government. It has also failed to be delivered within local government itself.

Although the Select Committee recognised that the Government were trying to roll out powers of well-being, for example, and that local authorities needed to use some of the powers that were available to them, many authorities do not feel that they are sufficient. They see them as rather woolly and ephemeral to what they are trying to achieve. One of our main points was that there was

> "clearly a wide division of opinion between the Government's view of recent developments and the views of the majority of our witnesses, many of whom believe that central direction and control remain unchanged or even that they have increased. The Government's record appears to us to be mixed. There remains a sizeable gap between the newly empowered local government that the Government believes it has established in principle, and the actual impact as witnessed at the local level."

A comparison of what is available to local authorities in Britain with the European norm shows the need for some constitutional protection and greater financial autonomy and for central Government intervention to be kept in check.

Sadly, I could not get the Select Committee to agree with me about trying to ensure that the Government had a statutory duty to report back to local government annually about what they had done across all Departments to achieve their stated objective of delivering more power to local people through a devolution settlement. I hope that the Under-Secretary will reflect on the points in the Select Committee report and my essay.

I have not given the Under-Secretary notice of my next point and will therefore understand if he writes to me about it. One of my constituents has raised an issue with me on behalf of the Henry Spink Foundation. The Spink family, who live in my constituency, have campaigned for disabled children and adults and their carers for many years. When disabled children and their families have to move from one local authority to another, they often find that the care package that has been agreed with one local authority cannot easily be transferred to another. The Henry Spink Foundation rightly wants to establish at least greater understanding and communication between local authorities to ensure that there is a floor below which services cannot fall. It wants pragmatic and cost-neutral reforms, which, it believes, will genuinely improve the lives of thousands of severely disabled children and adults and their carers throughout the UK. That would involve creating an independent social services tribunal, which would follow the tribunal model in other sectors, establishing an ombudsman for disability, as is found in other European Union countries, and reforming local authority regulations so that care assessments and support packages for children and adults become easily portable between one local authority and another.

I am interested in the Under-Secretary's comments about the interplay between where the Government state they wish to be and the Sustainable Communities Act 2007, which is relatively untested. In debates before the 2007 Act was passed, people cited the need to address some of the challenges that many local communities face, especially in sustaining town centres—for example, out-of-town supermarkets have an impact on town centres. The Government have been notified that many local authorities want, through the processes that the 2007 Act established, to explore the possibility of getting a more even playing field on, for example, subsidised parking. Parking is available at almost no cost—with no business rates levied—to the supermarkets, which gives them a massive advantage over their town centre competitors, whose customers have to pay prices, which are often high, for parking or face the problems of yellow lines, traffic wardens and so on.

Overall, I know that the Minister is delighted that we have had so much time to debate the issue, and I am pleased as well. I hope that he will take this opportunity to respond to many of the issues that I raised with him in advance. I hope that Cornwall and many other areas now have an opportunity to look with greater optimism to a future in which local authorities will be genuine power brokers in their local communities that can shape the future not only of their public services, which are their responsibility, but of the communities that they serve. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about enabling councils—not only in Cornwall, but across the country—to deliver a more devolved settlement and about having far better councils in future.

6.11 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I do not intend to detain the House for long, but may I first congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) on securing this Adjournment debate? It is about a vital issue that affects all our communities, including those in my part of the world, and clearly in his too. I commend him for that.

I also commend the hon. Gentleman on his speech, which was extremely thoughtful, thought provoking and interesting. He hit the nail on the head many times in talking about the issues that local people are concerned about. There is genuine concern about the relationship between central Government, regional government and local government.

However, one thing that the hon. Gentleman did not touch on, but which may be a fruitful topic for another time, is—to go further down the line—the role of parish councils and where they fit in. Local residents often see parish councils as expensive talking shops, but if they were given the powers that in my opinion they deserve, we could have genuinely local decision making and they would become more much powerful in the local communities that they serve. However, that debate is probably best left for another occasion.

I was particularly struck by the hon. Gentleman's opening comments about how the relationship between local government and national Government has become more centralised, but not just under this Government, although the situation has got worse. He was right that that has happened under successive Governments of all political persuasions. Let me consider briefly why that might be the case. When a party is in government and people wish to protest about what that Government are doing, they often do so in local elections, which means

that the political make-up of local government is often very different from that of central Government. Not wishing to give up their political power, central Government therefore decide to centralise powers, so that their political opponents cannot have them locally. We need a change of culture in central Government, so that they are more relaxed about people from different political parties having local control, because at the end of the day, that is what local democracy is all about. If people decide that they want a party in power locally that differs from the Government of the day, so be it. That is what local democracy is all about. Central Government should be much more relaxed about that and not try to keep all the power for themselves.

In my intervention on the hon. Gentleman, I touched on planning. In my part of the world, planning is the most emotive issue, in respect of the power of local authorities, and it is probably the one that exercises people more than any other. I have great sympathy for local councillors, because they are often put in an invidious position. They get the blame for decisions that are nominally taken locally, but they have little responsibility in shaping the outcome, because those decisions are actually made at a higher level, whether it be at the regional or central Government level. Councillors are put in an extremely difficult position. I would like much more power to be given to local government, which does matter to people. People identify with their local authority and their local area, and they respect that institution. We should be much more relaxed about giving local authorities far more power to determine what are clearly local matters.

No local matter is more important than planning. My constituents are sick to the back teeth of seeing more and more completely unwanted developments going up. Those developments change the nature of the villages, but people feel that they have absolutely no control over the decisions involved. They also feel that the local authority has little control over them. This problem manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes it is about garden developments. I have seen the nature of villages in my constituency change as a result of houses being crammed into every possible part of the village, often in people's gardens. However, local people find that the biggest handicap they face in dealing with the matter is not the local authority, which is often sympathetic to their concerns.

The problem is often that the sites are designated as brownfield sites, rather than greenfield sites, and that the planning laws are stacked against those who object to the proposals. A local authority might decide that a piece of land forms an important part of the green belt, or that it is of local significance and should be left alone, only to have a planning inspector overrule that decision and put the area into a development plan against the wishes not only of the local people but of the local authority. The land is then developed even though no one in the local area wants that to happen. Such decisions should be made at local level.

I listened with interest to the intervention by the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby), who was a distinguished local government leader. I certainly respect his experience in these matters, but I am not sure that I entirely agree with the premise of his argument. He suggested that these matters often had to be decided at a higher level because local authorities were full of nimbys and if the decisions were left to them, nothing would ever get built. Perhaps I am simplifying his argument slightly, but that seemed to be the thrust of it. I do not accept his point. If we believe that there is a need for more housing, presumably that need is expressed by local communities themselves. Presumably, people are saying that their daughters, sons and grandchildren cannot find anywhere to live and that more housing is therefore needed. The Government are for ever telling us that we need more housing because all these different categories of people are finding it difficult to get on to the housing ladder. If that is the case, surely local government is just as capable as central Government of responding to those local needs.

Sir Peter Soulsby: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is somewhat simplifying the point that I made earlier. I merely pointed out that the voices that he is talking about are far too easily drowned out by those who wish to oppose housing development in certain areas. I would argue strongly that it is legitimate for central Government to set housing targets to reflect the needs of people throughout the country, and that there needs to be something in between those national targets and the local tendency to say no. I would argue that that makes the case for an effective regional tier in spatial planning.

Philip Davies: I respect the hon. Gentleman's position, but I happen not to agree with him. Those decisions should be taken locally. It is for local people to decide those matters. That is the whole nature of local government.

Andrew George: What I did not go on to say in response to the hon. Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) was that we need to recognise the possible need for outside intervention in some cases involving diversity and discrimination. An example would be the provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites. Does the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) agree that, in cases where there might be perceived discrimination, a local authority should be encouraged to address certain needs or achieve certain targets and, if it failed, it should be required to do so?

Philip Davies: To be perfectly honest, I am not sure that I would, because my experience of things like Gypsy sites is that they are often a menace in local areas. I believe that it is incumbent on local agencies—whether it be the police, local authorities or whatever—to do something about it when these problems arise. Far too often, local authorities feel powerless to do anything about them because—whether they need to or not—they hide behind the fact that they have all these responsibilities that they cannot do anything about. That gives a bad deal to local people and it is not very good for local democracy.

I think that issues around Gypsy sites are very much local issues that should be dealt with by local authorities. I do not think that it should be farmed out to a central Government who might well be imposing something on local people that they do not want and should not have to put up with. Let us not pussyfoot around this. I know from my experience that some Gypsy sites have caused massive problems to local residents and local businesses, and I think local authorities have a duty to deal with those things. They should not pass them up to anyone else.

[Philip Davies]

I do not want to speak for long. I just want to touch on regional government because I think this is the issue that is now making people extremely concerned. We now often have local government being trumped by regional government, particularly in relation to planning, where we have seen regional assemblies dictating to local authorities how many houses should be built in their area, which to my mind should be a very local decision. It should have nothing to do with an unelected, unaccountable Government quango, which should not be able to dictate to an elected local authority how many houses should be built in the area. The local authority should decide that, based on the needs of the local community, what it can take and the infrastructure implications. Far too often, these decisions are made and local people feel powerless to do anything about them because of the very nature of regional government.

We know how unpopular regional government is because, to their credit, the Government offered the people of the north-east a referendum on regional government, and the people of the north-east, who are a very proud people—it is a very proud region, as are Yorkshire and Cornwall—clearly did not want regional government. They made that abundantly clear. It seems to me that the lesson the Government took from the north-east referendum was a perverse one because they seem to have decided that because the people of the north-east did not want an elected regional assembly, they must want an unelected regional assembly. It seems to me that only this Government could come to that particular conclusion based on the result of the referendum. What was abundantly clear to everybody else—apart, it seems, from the Government—was that the people were trying to say that they did not want regional government in any shape or form and that they wanted the powers to be decided at a local level. Regional government has far too much power; it is unelected and unaccountable.

The Government's late response to all this has been to abolish regional assemblies, which I absolutely and wholeheartedly support. They should never have been set up in the first place, but, to give credit where credit is due, the Government decided to abolish them. What did they then do? Did they give these powers to the local authorities and say, "We realise that regional government is not what people want; it should be decided at a local level"? No. What they did was give these planning powers to regional development agencies.

It is difficult to think of a worse outcome than regional assemblies, but the Government have managed to stumble across what is perhaps the only one that could be worse. To speak up for regional assemblies, I must say that, at least, they had people on them; they were not elected to that particular role, but they were elected in some form or other—they were probably council leaders and things like that so they had at least some democratic accountability. The Government have actually replaced the regional assemblies with the only body it is possible to think of with even less legitimacy—regional development agencies. The problem is not solved; to my mind, it has got even worse.

Until we have the courage of our convictions and give these powers to democratically elected people locally, people will always feel that they are powerless to do anything about what is probably the most important thing of all in their local community, which is deciding the level and appropriateness of housing developments in local areas. I think that the Government really have to accept that, whether it be a regional development agency or a regional assembly, people do not want these great regions.

The RDAs are spending huge quantities of taxpayers' money. Yorkshire Forward, the Yorkshire version, has a budget of something like £330 million a year to spend. Who is it accountable to? Nobody. Who is it elected by? Nobody. If it has any accountability at all, it is to the regional Minister. Therefore, we end up with the terrible situation in which it becomes the personal fiefdom of the regional Minister and pursues their pet projects, which are probably based more on political expediency than on the good of the region as a whole. In the modern day, that is no way to allocate hundreds of millions of pounds of public money.

Sir Peter Soulsby: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful case for the accountability of the regional development agencies, and one that has been accepted on both sides of the House; indeed, it was accepted by the Modernisation Committee when it made the recommendation for Regional Select Committees. The logic of his argument is that he and Members of the other minority parties ought to end their boycott of Regional Select Committees and come and join us in holding regional development agencies to account and filling the accountability gap that certainly exists.

Philip Davies: If the hon. Gentleman thinks the solution is Regional Select Committees, he misunderstands the problem. The problem is that these people are getting huge amounts of money, and it could be done far more democratically. Being hauled over the coals once or twice a year by a Regional Select Committee does not make regional development agencies democratic. That does not fill the democratic deficit. The solution is far more fundamental: to scrap regional government once and for all. Nobody wants it—it is a huge Government quango and bureaucracy. It would be good to have more local power.

My final point is on funding. Many Members on both sides of the House feel that capping council tax increases denies local accountability. Many take the view that that should be a local decision, and if people want to vote for a council that puts up council tax by 10 per cent., so be it. A council can stand or fall by that decision at the next local election. I have a lot of sympathy for that view of localness.

However, we cannot forget one important aspect: how things are paid for. My concern about going hell for leather for total localness relates to how local government is paid for. If not everybody pays council tax, there is a democratic problem. People might easily vote for high-spending local authorities knowing they will never have to pick up the tab. The only way to have a free-for-all in which local authorities can put up council tax by as much as they want, is to have a system in which everybody pays something. At least they are then in a position to decide whether they want to vote for the increase. But if council tax is put up, and the people voting for it are not paying it, there is a democratic problem. We should consider how to make local government totally accountable

by having everyone contribute something towards it. That would make people much more responsive to what is going on in their local authority.

I hope the Minister accepts that people are sick to the back teeth of local government not having the powers they want it to have. Central Government interfere far too much in local decisions. Trusting local authorities to make decisions for their local community would be good not just for local areas, but for local government, as it would attract higher-calibre people who felt that their decisions would make a difference, and for central Government, as they would not be interfering in matters they should not be dealing with. They could then concentrate on sorting out the problems they should be dealing with.

6.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Sadiq Khan): Tempting as it is to spend the time responding to the interesting contribution of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I will try my best to respond to the 21-page essay, which I read late into this morning, and the 43-minute speech of the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George). If there is time, I will then respond to the interesting points made by the hon. Member for Shipley.

I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives on securing the debate. I was pleased that the House's other business finished early, as it allowed the interventions and contributions of other hon. Members to be heard, and it gave him the flexibility to make his speech in a tempered and serious manner. I am pleased that he continues to show a keen interest in matters relating to the balance of powers between central and local government, and that the hon. Member for Shipley and my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Sir Peter Soulsby) also contributed to the debate. The enthusiasm of the hon. Member for St. Ives for discussions on this topic knows no bounds, and I was delighted to observe from his request for the debate that his membership of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government had further fuelled his appetite.

The hon. Gentleman quoted extracts from the Select Committee's recent report on the balance of powers between central and local government. I welcome his work and that of other members of the Committee. As he will know, we published an immediate response to the report. A detailed response will be produced in the not-too-distant future, but he will appreciate that for constitutional reasons none of the comments that I shall make today should be taken as a formal response.

Let me put into context some of the relationships between local and central Government before dealing with some of the points raised in his "essay", as the hon. Member for St. Ives called it. The Government strongly believe that local authorities are best placed to know what their communities need. I was a councillor for 12 years. I am aware of the work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South in this context, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Chris Mole), the Whip, has been a distinguished council leader as well. The Government know of the huge contribution made by local authorities, which is why we have taken unprecedented steps to put much more power into the hands of local government.

Keen historians will know—as will the hon. Member for St. Ives, who has been a Member of Parliament since 1997—that since that year local authorities have gained significant powers, responsibilities and financial freedoms from central Government to enable further devolution of decision making to local communities. I could not but agree with the opening observation by the hon. Member for Shipley that one of the reasons for central Government's nervous relationship with local authorities might be their different politics. He will recall that one of the justifications given by a former Prime Minister—I am going back four Prime Ministers—for abolishing the Greater London council was her affection for the then leader of the GLC. The hon. Gentleman made a fair point, but I think that even he would have to accept that over the past 12 years an attempt has been made to reverse some of the removal of power that took place during the preceding period.

Key legislation over the past decade has brought about a new relationship between central and local government and between local government and local people. I shall say more about that shortly. It has led to a marked shift in the culture in local authorities, featuring a much stronger focus on performance management and effective leadership on delivery. In particular—as the hon. Gentleman will know—the 2006 local government White Paper signalled devolution of power from Whitehall to town halls, and from local authorities to local communities in England. It set out ways of giving local authorities and their partners more freedom and powers to meet the needs of their citizens and communities, and to enable those citizens and communities themselves to play their part in bringing about the changes they wanted. The hon. Member for Shipley mentioned some of the key changes produced by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 following the White Paper.

The hon. Member for St. Ives spoke of the "control freakery" involved in a referendum that can lead to a negative vote. He will, of course, recall the vote in Wales which led to a Welsh Assembly, the vote in Scotland which led to the Scottish Parliament, and the vote in London which led to a Greater London Assembly and a Mayor of London. It is not always the case that local people vote against the regions in referendums.

Andrew George: The point I was making was that, for example in Scotland, the drive for the establishment of the Scottish Parliament was the result of the constitutional convention which was established there. It was driven from Scotland. I congratulate the Government on what they did in enabling that devolution, but the dynamics of the way it happened were different from those of the north-east referendum.

Mr. Khan: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. I am sure he would concede that there was also a Welsh experience and a London experience.

On the relationship between local and central Government, we cannot escape the issue of finance. In 2007, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government announced the first ever three-year local government finance settlement, which has given local government an extra £8.9 billion in comprehensive spending review 2007 and the flexibility to make longer-term plans and investments. That has been preserved in the recent Budget.

[Mr. Khan]

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the lack of ring-fencing and the flexibility that local authorities have in relation to the money given to them by central Government. More than £3 billion of funding paid through the completely unring-fenced area-based grant enables local authorities, working with partners, to decide where best to invest their resources in the most effective and efficient routes to deliver local priorities.

Sir Peter Soulsby: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the greater certainty that has been given on local government finance and the other measures that have been taken, which I think have been broadly welcomed in local government, but does he not accept that an unhealthily high proportion of local government funding still comes from central Government, and the inevitable feeling is that the person who pays the piper seeks to call the tune?

Mr. Khan: My hon. Friend would have a fair point if the money given to local authorities were ring-fenced and controlled from central Government, who decided how the money was spent. He will be aware of the number of representations that we in central Government receive from citizens complaining about their local authority, which is often of a different political persuasion, not spending money where we would like it spent. Instead, they build up their coffers for a swingeing council tax cut before an election. They do not use it as the Government would prefer. We recognise that we must let go, and let local people choose their local council and local councillors decide how the money is spent.

We are committed to maximising the flexibility given to local areas through unring-fenced funding with no performance or reporting conditions attached. So Government have already given councils more financial freedom to meet local needs and local priorities, but it is right that we continue to protect council tax payers from excessive increases. The hon. Member for Shipley had huge sympathy for those authorities that complain that they are unable to increase council tax by a disproportionately high figure for fear of being capped. We have no plans to change the current structure of council tax or to introduce a local income tax. To do so would create significant costs and place new burdens on businesses in these tough economic times.

The hon. Members for St. Ives and for Shipley alluded to the local performance framework. The Government have taken important steps to show a clear commitment to, and recognition of, the important roles that local government and its partners play in delivering services to citizens, through the development and implementation of the new local performance framework. In 2008, we introduced major changes in the way national Government, local authorities and local service providers work in partnership to deliver better services to improve the quality of life for local people. Those changes are all about finding out what local people need most, prioritising those needs and taking action to deliver results. It is about empowering residents and making sure that their needs are the driving force behind change.

The hon. Member for St. Ives sits on the Select Committee. He referred to the local area agreements, which cover all 152 upper-tier local authorities in England. They recognise that one size does not fit all and that locally delivered services must reflect what it is that local people need most. He will accept that no two agreements are exactly the same, because every area has different needs. I am sure he would welcome the fact that the new comprehensive area assessment, launched in April 2009, will be fair, rigorous and independent. It will help to ensure that local authorities and other service providers deliver the quality of services that local residents need. There will be less bureaucracy for service providers themselves to deal with, which will leave them free to concentrate on delivering results and driving up standards. Up to £185 million has been made available to regional improvement and efficiency partnerships—RIEPs. The hon. Member for Shipley referred to his love for RDAs, but he forgot to refer to his love for RIEPs. They work with local authorities and strategic partners in each region to support improvement and efficiency in the delivery of services. The hon. Member for St. Ives will recognise that in this recession RIEPs and RDAs have played a huge role in helping to rebuild those parts of our country that were not helped in previous recessions. In those days, such was the control from Whitehall that there was not as much connection as there now is with local communities. RIEPs and RDAs have also brought inward investment from Europe and have created other revenue streams that do not come from Whitehall.

Andrew George: I certainly look forward to a day when there is a performance framework set by local government for central Government, so that local government can see whether government is devolved.

In terms of delivering the devolved settlement and giving powers to local authorities, would the Government be prepared to look at establishing in legislation the European charter of local self-government? Putting that on a statutory basis would demonstrate a real commitment to supporting local government. Also, might it be possible to work with other Departments such as the Department of Health to make sure that the fracture between the NHS, the local community and social care is overcome by locally elected people? I am sure the Government have it in their power to deliver those things.

Mr. Khan: The problems articulated by the hon. Gentleman are referred to in detail in the Select Committee report. I will not succumb to the temptation to give the Department's response to it, except to say that the report was clear about some of the things we can do to make government more joined up and to ensure that there can be a basis for filling in the gaps to which he has referred. I am sure our formal response will take on board some of the points he has made in the debate, as well as those referred to in the report.

RIEPs are made up of local authorities—locally elected councillors—working with partners, and they are committed to working together to raise performance collectively. They will work closely with the sector to co-ordinate an analysis of regional improvement and efficiency-capacity building needs.

I want to talk briefly about regional powers. Multi-area agreements are one of the key tools to enable local authorities, working beyond their traditional boundaries, to deliver key economic outcomes better and faster. Ten

partnerships of local authorities have so far signed multi-area agreements, with further negotiations under way.

The future is relevant not only because of the context of today's debate, but because of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill, which is currently going through this House and which began its life in the House of Lords. Despite the progress we have made over the past 12 years, we recognise there is a need for further reform. Therefore, the White Paper I have referred to was published, which passes real power into the hands of local citizens and communities, giving greater control and influence to more people. Key ways in which this White Paper gives greater substance to councillors' community leadership role include the following: the new duty to promote democracy; extending the duty to involve people in decisions, policies and services to additional agencies and bodies; a new duty to respond to petitions; and creating a new "empowering the frontline taskforce" to look at the role of the public service work force in empowering users and residents. A practical example of how we have encouraged the passing of power into the hands of citizens and communities is the considerable growth of participatory budgeting, which now gives people a say over budgets in at least 55 local area agreement areas—that is 36 per cent. of them. Since 2005, local people—and not just elected councillors—have been given a direct say over how at least £14 million-worth of local public budgets have been spent.

Philip Davies: Could the Minister comment on matters such as local transport? In my constituency, the local residents and the local council want to do something about a congested area, Saltaire roundabout, but they cannot get the funding because it is determined by an unelected regional transport board. Could not these powers be handed down to local authorities, so that local people could have a better say in how money is spent? At the moment, with the regional transport board, they feel that they have no say.

Mr. Khan: That argument contradicts the point that the hon. Gentleman made in his speech, but local authorities could let go of some of their moneys to local communities and let them decide how to spend it. This is not simply about the local councils bidding for money from the RDAs, the RIEPs, the Government or elsewhere, as they should carry on doing; it is also about local authorities being given record sums from central Government over the past 12 years. Local authorities could let go of some of that money, as it is not ring-fenced, and allow local communities to decide how it is spent. The hon. Gentleman's example demonstrates why local authorities cannot always work by themselves to get the solutions; they will need to work with other local authorities, which is why a regional tier of government might sometimes be one of the solutions to the problems that he highlights.

I shall not revisit the order of last year; I have read some of the debates in *Hansard* and found them interesting. I note the objection of the hon. Member for St. Ives to that order. He will be aware—he referred to this when discussing tomorrow's elections—that Cornwall underwent a major step change when the seven councils were replaced with a single unitary Cornwall council. He made the serious point that, notwithstanding his objection, he wants to ensure that it is a success, and it is important that that is recognised.

The vision that the hon. Gentleman set out in his essay was for a Cornish regional assembly; he described it as "an ambitious plan". The people of Cornwall clearly feel strongly about certain issues: they believe that Cornwall should act as an exemplar for environmental best practice—the hon. Gentleman mentioned that in his speech; they advocate social justice, with locally focused housing and transport plans; and they want multi-area agreements to be developed. All those issues can be explored further in the context of the new unitary authority, and we stand ready to provide continuing support to achieve success in those areas. As he notes, the advent of a unitary Cornwall marks a jumping-off point for further local empowerment. I agree that it is important that we look towards the future and fully utilising the powers available to the new Cornwall council.

I have dealt with the points made about the north-east referendum. The hon. Gentleman also referred to the agents of vision within central Government. I hope that he will accept that over the past 12 years there has been a genuine attempt by this Government to give more power away. He will see that, notwithstanding the imperfections that any Bill has, the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill is another example of devolving power to the citizen and turning what were previously subjects into active citizens who have more control over their communities.

I have a problem with the hon. Member for Shipley, which is that when I was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the House I found myself agreeing with him far too often for the liking of any Labour Member. He began his contribution by discussing some of the tensions between central and local government when two different political parties are involved, and I could not help but agree. He also demanded that there be more power for local authorities, which surprised me, bearing in mind the fact that his party voted against giving that Bill, which will give such power to those authorities, a Second Reading. I hope that he will be on the Committee and will support the Bill there. He also referred to development on brownfield sites, and that also caused me concern because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South reminded me, one cannot have it both ways and be against development on greenfield and brownfield land—development must take place somewhere.

On the point that the hon. Member for Shipley made about Gypsy sites, he was in danger of confusing unauthorised encampments and developments with authorised Traveller and Gypsy sites. The hon. Member for St. Ives, in a very responsible way, talked about the need for more authorised sites, because the more authorised sites there are, there less likely there are to be tensions between the settled communities and those Travellers and Gypsies who live on the unauthorised encampments or developments. He accepted the role that regional tiers could play in easing some of the tensions between local authorities that might not want an authorised Traveller or Gypsy site on their patch.

In conclusion, I would say that a great deal has been done to get the balance right between central and local government. I forgot to mention the question raised by

[Mr. Khan]

the hon. Member for St. Ives about the Henry Spink Foundation. There are national standards of care. I was at a meeting today in relation to a social care Green Paper, and the hon. Gentleman referred to the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. May I take this subject away and write to him to deal specifically with the points that he raised? I will refer to *Hansard* to ensure that I get the point right, and I will get back to him.

The Government have already given a lot to local government, including greater financial freedom and stability and a drastic reduction in the number of indicators, targets and assessments. We have established a clearer, more transparent relationship between central and local government, allowing policy development through co-design. Long may this continue.

We are at a crucial stage of our relationship. The economic times we face will test us all, but local government and its partners need to grasp this chance and the opportunities that we have given them to show us—and, most importantly, local residents—what they can achieve by working closely together.

I hope that through the matters I have outlined in my speech, I have enabled the hon. Member for St. Ives to agree that the Government have done a lot to devolve powers to local areas, including Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this Adjournment debate and on his interest in this important area.

Question put and agreed to.

6.51 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 4 June 2009

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Global Population

1. **Martin Linton** (Battersea) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the effects of climate change on the global population; and if he will make a statement. [277918]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): May I first apologise for the absence of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State this morning? His partner, Justine, gave birth to a son on Tuesday, so he is taking paternity leave—thanks, of course, to the policy of this Government.

To answer the question, the Secretary of State has frequent discussions with his international counterparts on the effects of climate change on the global population. Adaptation to the impacts of climate change is a key priority for interfiational climate change negotiations, and we recognise that the effects of climate change will have the greatest impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

Martin Linton: I congratulate the Secretary of State and his partner on this new addition to world population.

Has my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary read Kofi Annan's report for the Global Humanitarian Forum, showing that climate change is now responsible for 300,000 deaths a year—98 per cent. of them in developing countries? Has she also seen the forecast that if emissions are not brought under control, climate change will create 75 million refugees by 2034?

Joan Ruddock: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that most important report to the House's attention. I have indeed seen the report and the figures that he has mentioned. We have absolutely no doubt that that adds to the pressure that we all as part of the international community properly need to absorb and bring to the discussions at Copenhagen at the end of this year. We will not get a global deal unless we can help developing countries to adapt to the effects of climate change, which are already happening and are, of course, the responsibility of the developed world.

We are strong supporters of the United Nations framework convention on climate change adaptation fund, and we have given a considerable sum of money to the climate resilience programme, which is enabling countries to adapt. In Zambia, we are helping people living on the Zambezi flood plain to protect their crops against damage caused by flooding; in Lesotho, we are helping people establish small gardens to make them less vulnerable to food shortage caused by drought; and in Bangladesh, we are helping people to raise their homes on plinths to protect them from the seasonal rains. This country has led the way on climate change, not only on mitigation but on adaptation.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): First, I congratulate the Secretary of State. I want to ask the Minister whether the Government's policy is based on ideology or science. She knows that for a theory to be scientific, it must be capable of being refuted by the evidence. Given that we have had three decades of rising temperatures, followed by a decade of stable and slightly falling temperatures worldwide, how many decades would she require before she were convinced that the theory on which she is committing £400 billion of taxpayers' money might be slightly wrong?

Joan Ruddock: The right hon. Gentleman is very fond of quoting rather alarmist figures—

Mr. Lilley: They are your figures.

Joan Ruddock: Indeed, they are our figures, but we are talking about a sum of money that will be spent over more than 40 years, whereas the right hon. Gentleman presents it as if it were all for today. The issue that he has raised about science is very important. Scientists have been predicting for decades the effects of global warming, and the predicted effects are indeed happening. He needs to look at sea level rises, for example, which have been consistent, and the predictions are very extreme indeed. Where he claims that the temperature has gone down, that is very much a short-term phenomenon. When the period of temperature rises is measured against all historic records, it is very unusual. The consensus opinion of world scientists is that it extremely likely that all these effects are man-made. Even if he does not believe in the science, he should believe in taking action to adapt to what is happening—whatever the causes might be. We are quite clear as a Government that the consensus of world scientists is that this is a man-made phenomenon. We must take proper steps to tackle the continuing rise in greenhouse gas emissions, and we will do so.

Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell) (Lab): Quite right too. My hon. Friend will know that the Waxman-Markey Bill on tackling climate change is working its way through the US Congress, but it has already been watered down somewhat—and it has not yet reached the Senate. That suggests that the Bill could be watered down more.

Considering that background, if we are to have higher ambitions in the EU based on a deal, should we not have benchmarks in place—I do not ask my hon. Friend to reveal those now, as they are obviously a matter of negotiation—to say that other annexe I countries, which one hopes the United States will soon become, should have higher standards and a better approach than that represented by the Waxman-Markey Bill?

Joan Ruddock: We are most optimistic about the commitment made by President Obama, who has said that the US will lead in the climate change talks. His Secretary of State has said that the US is determined to see that the talks produce a result, and we are confident that it will play a proper part.

My hon. Friend is correct about the Bill—it has been somewhat watered down—and we are encouraging the Administration to have the greatest possible ambition: they are engaged; they accept the science; and they have negotiators with a positive approach. We believe that we will be able to achieve a global deal. It will be important that there is a commitment by the US to make the emissions reduction that is required by 2050, which is 80-per cent. for developed countries. Already, the President has said that the US can make that commitment. It is in a difficult situation because of the history under the previous Administration. We understand that, but there is a great deal of good will. This is a matter of negotiation, and we will continue to press the Administration for the greatest possible ambition.

Road Transport (Emissions)

2. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions arising from road transport. [277919]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I join in the congratulations offered to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his partner on the birth of their son. There are regular discussions between Departments. Indeed, on 19 May, the Secretaries of State discussed carbon budgets.

Andrew Selous: The Minister may be aware of the Chinese company BYD, which is spending billions on developing the battery-powered cars of the future. My concern is that the UK may miss out on that important market. Will he join me in congratulating Vauxhall on its superb Ampera model, which most people will be able to drive most of the time while producing hardly any carbon emissions? What action are the Government taking to install more public recharging points around the country to enable this incredibly important market for the future to develop here?

Mr. O'Brien: A number of companies are taking the initiative to develop electric vehicles and hybrid vehicles, which are plug-in and rechargeable. We need to encourage such development not only in the UK, but worldwide. I congratulate Vauxhall on the work it has been doing and on the Volt, which is another General Motors product. That company has problems, but at least some real research and development work is being done. Increasingly, not just the energy companies, but some petrol and diesel suppliers, are recognising that they need to install plug-in points so that cars can be recharged. We are seeing the beginning of what, over the coming decade, is likely to become a vastly expanding industry, with thousands of such vehicles coming on to our roads.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Is there not a powerful argument for not producing carbon dioxide from transport emissions? May I alleviate the concerns of sceptics such as the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) by saying that we cannot go on acidifying the sea because the changes in that environment have gone way too far? That powerful argument for reducing carbon dioxide emissions is rarely used.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right that we need to ensure that we are aware of the acidification of the sea and that we recognise it as part of the overall development of a transport and environment policy.

The Government have been clear about the fact that we want real investment to go into developing vehicles that are less polluting—indeed, are low polluting—of the atmosphere. That is why we put £100 million into supporting research and demonstration of new vehicles and £250 million has been announced for consumer incentives in coming years for lower-carbon vehicles. There is a £20 million procurement of low-carbon vehicles for the Government and a £2.3 billion package of support for the automotive sector in the downturn, which has been tailored to support the development of low-carbon products.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge) (Con): Does the Minister agree that his Government's proposal to expand Heathrow will inevitably lead to increased road transport and increased carbon dioxide emissions?

Mr. O'Brien: As part of the process of developing our transport policy, particularly in relation to Heathrow, we have ensured that we have clear targets for emissions reduction. Clearly, bringing aviation into our climate change policies is part of that. In relation to road transport and Heathrow, we want to ensure that we develop policies on hybrid and electric vehicles that will reduce overall emissions from motor vehicles in the coming decades.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Will the Minister of State convey our warmest congratulations to the Secretary of State and Justine on the birth of their son? We wish them much joy during the years ahead. I am lost in admiration for the meticulousness of Ed's planning: he has provided himself with an excuse to go to ground this weekend that is even more convincing than John Major's toothache.

Can the Minister of State say which electric vehicles will qualify for the £5,000 voucher announced the week before the Budget?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations, which I will pass on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. We will consult shortly on how the funding that we have announced will be best distributed. We want the growth in the use of electric vehicles to be a key area for development. The initiative will help to put electric vehicles within the reach of ordinary motorists, by providing help worth between £2,000 and £5,000 towards buying the first electric and plug-in hybrid cars when they hit the showroom, which we expect to occur from 2011 onwards, although some companies are indicating that an earlier date might be possible.

Greg Clark: Is it not the truth that no electric vehicle is available now, or will even be available in 2011, that will qualify for the voucher? If we want to build support for a low-carbon economy, is it not essential that we avoid such gimmicks and stunts?

Mr. O'Brien: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman sees the development of electric vehicles and support for consumers to purchase those vehicles as merely a stunt. There are already electric vehicles that are fine for short trips in the city rather than long-distance trips. We are prepared to put in place the incentives that will ensure that the technology improves—it appears that he would not do that were he ever in government. However, we are taking steps now to provide funding for research and development, and to identify funding, which the car makers and manufacturers will know will be in place, to provide incentives for consumers in future to buy the vehicles we want manufacturers to produce.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) was looking for congratulations to Vauxhall for developing a new type of vehicle, which might well—we must wait and see—meet some of the criteria. If the Government were to change, however, it appears that Vauxhall might well be severely disadvantaged, and his constituents would be disadvantaged by re-electing him. Conservative Front Benchers seem to be abandoning Vauxhall and its workers.

Domestic Buildings (Energy Efficiency)

3. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the energy efficiency of domestic and commercial buildings in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [277920]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): The energy efficiency of individual domestic and non-domestic buildings is assessed primarily through energy performance certificates, which are required for all buildings when constructed, sold or let. The heat and energy saving consultation, published in February, sought evidence about energy efficiency in non-domestic buildings and asked for views on potential policy responses. We are now considering the responses to the consultation.

Dr. Lewis: Is it not a fact that between 1997 and the present day there has been hardly any improvement in household energy efficiency in the United Kingdom, according to ODEX, the index that measures these matters, and is it not a fact that in the preceding period—the years leading up to 1997—there was a 14 per cent. increase in household energy efficiency? What is it about this Government that has destroyed the improvement, as measured by the internationally accepted standard?

Joan Ruddock: This country has a long history of poorly insulated buildings, which, as the hon. Gentleman knows, goes back many generations. The Government are making a real effort to ensure that much more attention is paid to insulation. We have already insulated 5 million buildings in the domestic sector as a consequence of our carbon emissions reduction target provisions and the obligations on energy companies. Our current programme will lead to the insulation of a further 6 million buildings, and, as I said earlier, we have introduced energy performance certificates. We have the green homes service, run by the Energy Saving Trust, and we have the Act On CO_2 helpline.

There are many, many strategies in place, and we are making improvements. People are saving money as a result of our policies, and they are lowering their carbon emissions. However, we accept that there is much more to be done. We recently engaged in a major consultation on a heat and energy saving strategy, which will bring about improvements in millions of houses over the next few years.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): May I ask that our best wishes and congratulations be passed to the Secretary of State, his partner and their extended family on the birth of their little boy?

Ministers know that so far we have performed very poorly in relation to energy efficiency in domestic properties. According to a ministerial answer, only one in 100 homes meets the required standards. The Minister has just referred to the range of existing programmes. Will she reaffirm the importance of the leadership of the European Union and the European Parliament in pushing forward energy efficiency? Given that this is also local election day, will she consider our proposal for the establishment of a single central Government agency to bring all the policies together, and for local councils across the United Kingdom to roll out a programme—arranged locally, but supported by national Government—to ensure that every home is a warm home within 10 years?

Joan Ruddock: The Government are always happy to consider any proposals on these issues from any of the Opposition parties. If the hon. Gentleman examines the heat and energy saving strategy, he will see that it includes options that are not dissimilar to his proposal. As I have said, we believe that we need much greater drive and much more co-ordination. We have learned from many of the programmes that will come on stream in the autumn. The community energy saving programme will enable us for the first time to deal with the areas in greatest need, house by house and street by street. It will give us a basis on which to introduce programmes that will make the whole population energy-efficient over the next couple of decades.

We are very clear about the fact that by 2015 every cavity and loft that it is appropriate to insulate will have been insulated, and 7 million homes will have had a complete eco-makeover by 2020. That is a very positive programme. We will continue to keep everything under review. We need to do as much as we can, because the emissions from our homes constitute about 27 per cent. of total carbon emissions. We absolutely must get to grips with this sector. We shall need more co-operation and involvement on the part of the public at large, and I hope that all parties will play their part in helping that process.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I commend the Minister for her efforts, but will she accept that a major part of the energy expended by a building during its life cycle is expended during its construction, and that the vilification of older property—particularly antique property—that is not capable of being double-glazed or cavity wall-insulated as part of the home information pack process is rather unfortunate?

Joan Ruddock: In this country, we have many historic and listed buildings. We are endeavouring to find ways both to preserve the fabric of historic buildings and to improve their energy efficiency. The Government have provided £1 million for ongoing work with the Energy

Saving Trust. We know that we must achieve both those aims, and we are committed to ensuring that we do so. While that work is being undertaken, however, as the vast majority of homes in this country are more than capable of receiving standard measures, the most important thing we can do is both encourage people to get on with the work and continue with the Government programmes that give financial assistance and oblige energy companies to ensure that those homes that can be easily insulated are quickly insulated in advance of next winter.

Mr. Speaker: May I gently remind the Minister that I must ensure that we get through the Order Paper?

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I hope the Minister will also pass on my very warmest best wishes to the Secretary of State and his partner.

In the Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), she put her finger on the nub of the issue when she said that there are "many, many strategies in place", because the fact of the matter is that the Government's approach to energy efficiency is fragmented and confused. We have social energy tariffs, energy performance certificates, the decent homes standard, Warm Front, winter fuel payments, the low-carbon buildings programme, the carbon emissions reduction target, new building regulations, warm zones, the community energy saving programme, Fuel Direct, the green homes service and fuel poverty targets. No wonder the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said:

"There's a lot...out there...but it's hard to know where to start."

Given that the Government are now totally paralysed and Ministers' minds are clearly focused elsewhere, is it not clear that they are never going to get to grips with energy efficiency, and that the bottom line is that the lights are on, but nobody's home?

Joan Ruddock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his amusing contribution. I am also most grateful to him for having listed so many of the Government's programmes, and I hope the House is impressed by the extent of our work and our focus on these issues. The fact of the matter is that many programmes are required, because it is essential to involve many sectors and to have different approaches. We believe that there is scope for bringing approaches together—that is in the current consultation, which I recommend that the hon. Gentleman reads. I also thank him and the Liberal Front-Bench spokesman for their kind words about my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Copenhagen Conference

4. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What the Government's priorities are for a global agreement on climate change in Copenhagen in December. [277921]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): Our priority at Copenhagen is to seek a comprehensive agreement, which gives the best chance of limiting global temperature rises to no more than 2° C. To achieve that, we want to see ambitious emissions reductions targets from developed countries, action by developing countries to reduce emissions below business-as-usual levels and agreement on finance and technology flows to support developing-country action.

John Howell: I thank the Minister for that response, but what grounds does she have for believing that Copenhagen will be more successful than Kyoto and that unanimity can be reached?

Joan Ruddock: Since Kyoto, the world community has become more conscious of the science of climate change. In every country that we visit, no matter what its perspective, all the conversations that we have show a real understanding that the situation is very serious and that we need to avert the most dangerous climate change. Because of that, minds are much more focused and we have much more science—we also have a new mood in the United States of America, which is extremely important. We also know that China, which is doing a great deal domestically already, is now approaching the talks in a very positive manner, and we have great co-operation from the G77 countries. There is reason to be optimistic, therefore, and even more so because of the commitments that the US Administration have made.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Minister has stated that one of her personal priorities, which is shared on both sides of the House, is the increased use of electric cars. The first law of thermodynamics says that one cannot create energy, so what sort of cost-benefit or overall analysis has she done on the effects on climate change of having to produce the extra electricity generation capacity to power all those electric cars, which we hope we will have—they will certainly help asthma sufferers in the UK—in the years to come?

Joan Ruddock: The key to the extra generation of electricity is renewables—*[Interruption.]* I am being pressed as to whether or not that involves nuclear. We have said that there needs to be an energy mix, of which nuclear is a part. Nuclear power creates a lot of emissions through building and the mining of the ore, but when these facilities are in operation, they are then emission-free. So, of course nuclear power has a part to play, but renewables and, in particular—given that we are examining international needs and discussions—the ability to transfer technology, particularly to developing countries, to enable others to produce electricity by low-carbon or no-carbon means, are crucial. That is because there needs to be growth in those emerging economies. That is also why we are working with China on carbon capture and storage for coal, because that is another area where reducing emissions from energy sources is crucial.

Electric Vehicles

6. **Mr. Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on the Government's policy on carbon dioxide emissions arising from the generation of electricity used by electric vehicles. [277923]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Mr. Mike O'Brien): Ministers regularly discuss these issues, and we are committed to reducing overall transport emissions as part of tackling climate

change. We will publish our transport carbon reduction strategy this summer, which will examine, among other things, the development of electric vehicles.

Mr. Goodwill: Electric vehicles are often described as having zero emissions—that may be the case as they drive down Park lane, but it is not the case at Drax, Ferrybridge or Eggborough, where the electricity may be produced from coal. Given the current energy mix of our base load, and given that after allowing for the energy loss at the power station and transmission loss an electric vehicle is only about 33 per cent. emission efficient, which compares with a figure of 45 per cent. for a diesel car, which is the more carbon friendly, the diesel car or the electric car?

Mr. O'Brien: We are looking at the development of vehicles that will be increasingly low-carbon. That is one of the key reasons why the Government have already put a substantial amount of funding into research and development. It is possible to reduce the level of emissions from internal combustion engine cars that use petrol and other fuels, as well as developing electric vehicles, which are substantially lower generators of carbon and other emissions. We hope that such an approach will, in the long term, ensure that our environment is better protected. I think that the hon. Gentleman is right to say that at the moment we still need to work very hard on the research and development area, but that is precisely why the Government are putting in the extra funding and why, unlike his party, we believe we need to flag up the fact that consumers will be incentivised to buy low-carbon vehicles in the future.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): Notwithstanding the Minister's comments about the potential for reducing emissions from individual cars, is not the management and limitation of CO_2 emissions in the generation of electricity potentially much more effective than reducing emissions from individual, carbon-fuelled vehicles, be they on the road or the railway? Does he agree that that is part of the overwhelmingly powerful case for the electrification of the midland main line and other similar routes?

Mr. O'Brien: It is important that we ensure that we electrify our main lines and put in place a transport policy that not only ensures that we do not transfer emissions from the streets to power stations, but whose overall breadth ensures that we recognise that public transport and developing community-based transport are key parts of the future development of a low-carbon energy strategy in the decades to come.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The Minister has made the point that the source of the electricity is crucial to the efficiency of the electric car, and therefore the Government have to deliver a low-carbon electricity-generating system. Would not the early introduction of smart metering help to make electric cars more efficient, so that they could be optimised to charge when the wind is blowing and renewable energy is available and surplus to capacity?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is right: we need to ensure that we not only introduce smart meters—we have already announced that we want to see them introduced across the whole country over the next decade—but investigate the uses that a smart grid system can make of the smart meters. In a decade's time, smart meters will have developed in sophistication, and be able to communicate with refrigerators and other equipment. It will be possible for signals to be sent from the central base to various gadgets in the home to reduce the amount of electricity they use at peak times and increase it during the night or other quiet times. We want a smart grid system to go with the smart meters, with a level of sophistication that enables us better to manage the amount of electricity that we use.

Topical Questions

T1. [277939] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Secretary of State has reason to smile because he has just become a father, and also because the new Department has now been able to move most of its staff into its new building at 3 Whitehall place. It is always challenging to set up a new Department, but the move should be complete by the end of the month. I have now moved out of a photocopying room into a Minister's office, which always helps, especially when I have visitors. The Department can now focus much more effectively on its key aims—to tackle climate change, to provide energy security for the UK and to do both at an affordable price.

Philip Davies: Will the Minister confirm the figures in his Department's document that say that the impact of the renewables target on gas bills will be to increase them by up to 23.6 per cent.? How many more people will that increase put into fuel poverty?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is creating the image that everything will happen immediately and that next week we will suddenly see massive rises. We are talking about a considerable period of time in which we will develop renewables and a range of low-carbon energy generation—something that his Front-Bench team also claims that it wants to see happen. We need to ensure that happens over the next decade—indeed up to 2050 and beyond—to deal with the problem of climate change. The costs of not dealing with climate change will be much greater for the consumer and the world. It is essential that we develop renewables—

Mr. Speaker: Order. In topical questions, I am looking for punchy questions and answers. Perhaps Mr. Hendry can try.

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. By the time the Minister has finished, the questions will not be topical any more. *[Laughter.]*

This morning we have heard from the Government about some of their consultation schemes on smart meters, energy efficiency, electric cars, tidal barrages, carbon capture, renewable heat and biogas. Does the Minister understand the frustration of so many people in the energy sector with the endless process of reviews and consultations? We need a Government with the power to make decisions and to stop just talking about things.

Mr. O'Brien: This Government have made a whole series of decisions on issues such as smart meters and developing nuclear. The Opposition, however, are a different matter. Let us take the example of nuclear: they were in favour of it, and then as soon as the Government said that we would consult on taking a view on the move to nuclear, they decided to oppose it. After we announced our move, they decided, "All right, we're back in exactly the same position as we were before." Those on the Conservative Front Bench cannot make up their mind about most things, whereas we have set out clear strategies for developing renewables, for developing nuclear, for dealing with climate change and for ensuring that we have energy security in this country.

T2. [277940] **Robert Key** (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Government make up their mind on how important they think tidal flow technology is? Of course we must harness green energy from the sea and of course it is possible to build something like the Severn barrage, but that would cause irreversible damage to the environment and economy of the whole Severn estuary. Instead, can we please put far more resource and effort into tidal flow technology around our coasts?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are consulting on the development of this key area. Using tidal and using containment of tidal developments at the 4-metre tidal wave level in the Severn, we know that in the future we can develop a level of electricity generation around our coast that will help to protect our environment. That is why ensuring that we go through all the environmental analysis of the Severn estuary and of the development of tidal and estuary electricity in the future is key to our energy policy.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): Increasingly, consumers are opting to sign up for so-called green electricity tariffs, often without knowing what they are getting or what they are signing up for. Will the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing to ensure that people are signing up for something of genuine environmental benefit?

Mr. O'Brien: Of course Ofgem is responsible for regulating the various tariffs and the way the energy companies charge people for the different rates of electricity that they supply. Ofgem has just completed a review of some areas of charging. It had some concerns and obliged the energy companies to change some of their proposals. If particular concerns arise with regard to so-called green tariffs, those are matters that Ofgem needs to deal with and the Government would strongly urge Ofgem to be straightforward in ensuring that it deals with these issues.

T3. [277943] **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East) (Con): We have established that domestic energy efficiency improvements under the Conservatives came to an almost grinding halt under this Government, but what about Government Departments? According to the display energy certificates for the 17 Departments, only two achieved a grade C and three achieved a grade E. Seven were graded F and five got the bottom grade of G, including the Department of Energy and Climate Change. Is that what the Government regard as leading by example?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): As the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, the fact is that many Government buildings are very ancient or are listed buildings. DECC is in that category. It is extremely difficult for a Department to raise its standards quickly when it is occupying such a building, but we are absolutely determined to do so. We are looking at every aspect of the heating, the ventilation, the water use and the waste in that building. We are committed overall as a Government to a 12.5 per cent. reduction in emissions from Government Departments by 2010 and we are confident that we now have in place sufficient measures to achieve that.

T4. [277944] **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that on current policies, the UK will fall woefully short of its 2020 target on renewable energy?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No.

T5. [277945] **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): Will the Minister accept that the European Commission's proposals to mitigate climate change could well cost this country £9 billion a year by 2020? It is estimated that that could put 1 million more households into fuel poverty, and increase the average fuel bill by £200. Is that what the Government want to achieve? I am not sure that that will be very popular. Should they not pay more attention to energy security, so that we do not get three-day-a-week black-outs, and every other problem that we had in the past?

Joan Ruddock: Great attention is being paid to energy security. In the longer term, renewables will add to our energy security because they will reduce imports of fuel from other countries. The fact is that there is a need to do that work. The costs would be much greater to all of us if we did not mitigate dangerous climate change, and if we had adapt to the worst effects, so the money will be well spent. Of course, as we make progress people's fuel bills will go down when they are able to take up all the measures. They will save energy and therefore money. Although it is necessary to put public funds into the development of renewables and energy efficiency, we are committed to seeing that it is done fairly. Of course, we do not seek in any way to put more people into fuel poverty. On the contrary, we have a strategy to get them out, unlike the Conservative party.

Mr. John Baron (Billericay) (Con): The consumer organisation Which? has calculated that there are something like 4,000 different tariffs; that can be very confusing for consumers. As a result, many of the people who are switching switch to a more expensive tariff. In the light of my ten-minute Bill, which would oblige energy companies to publish on their bills whether the consumer is accessing the company's cheapest tariff—an idea welcomed, by the way, by the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box—what steps are the Government taking to ensure that energy bills are used to highlight important information such as that, in order to improve energy efficiency?

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Very good question.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Someone said, sotto voce, that that was a very good question, and indeed it is. Switching has highlighted the fact that some people are not getting information that enables them to ensure that they are

better off when they switch. We need to make sure that the information they receive is much more honest and valid; sometimes those who encourage switching provide some questionable information. However, there are websites where reliable information could be obtained, and making sure that that information is more widely known is important. We will publish our broader strategy on fuel poverty in due course, and we are considering some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised. Certainly, one of the issues to which we need to give serious consideration is the idea that he puts forward of having more information on bills about the sort of tariffs available.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

Parliamentary Questions

1. **Mr. Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the completeness of answers to parliamentary questions for written answer. [277946]

4. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure the completeness of answers to parliamentary questions for written answer. [277950]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Bryant): My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House and I are fully committed to making sure that Ministers give faithful, honest, complete and timely answers to written parliamentary questions. We keep the matter under continuous review.

Mr. Goodwill: I have to say that I am generally very pleased with the quality of the answers that I get from the Department for Transport, but occasionally—possibly because I am at fault, not having tabled the question precisely enough—the question could be open to misinterpretation. I was pleased a couple of weeks ago to get a call from an official at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea asking for clarification, but more recently, I rather suspected that I had been fobbed off with an answer to a question that the Department would have preferred to have been asked, rather than to the question that I asked. Could officials be asked to take the opportunity to speak to Members more often to find out what information they need, so that Members do not have to table another question and incur more expense?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good suggestion. In one particular case relating to some questions to the Department for Transport that he tabled, I have followed up on the problem that he had. I think that there was a misunderstanding in the Department, and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham (Paul Clark), wrote to the hon. Gentleman this morning to say that he will make clear the precise situation and make a proper correction to *Hansard*.

Philip Davies: When the Prime Minister said that he could not implement the full police pay rise of 2.5 per cent. at arbitration, but could pay only 1.9 per cent. because of the impact on inflation, I tabled a question to the Chancellor asking what the difference would be to the overall inflation rate if either pay rise were implemented. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury gave a long-winded answer that did not address the question. The Office for National Statistics could provide an answer, however, which was that either figure would not have made a blind bit of difference to the overall inflation rate. Clearly, the answer had not been given because it was embarrassing to the Government. Could we make sure that accurate and full answers are given, even if the information might embarrass the Government?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the Government should provide truthful answers, whether they embarrass the Government or not. I also take the point about providing timely and full answers, which is why this week I wrote to three Departments where there have been difficulties in providing enough timely answers. There is sometimes an issue with the numbers of staff who provide suggested replies to Ministers, and sometimes there is a problem for Ministers: for instance, one Minister in the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, answers 600 questions a month. Obviously, that is a pretty severe stress.

I had a sneaking suspicion that the hon. Gentleman might raise the issue of his question last year. I should not say that the three, or perhaps four, paragraphs of the Chief Secretary reply were long-winded; if anything, they were not quite long-winded enough. In fact, on the fuller letter and the question that he asked me previously, I did some following up for him and I think he has had a more substantial answer that goes into some depth about all the issues that he raises.

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): We have had repeated assurances from the Leader of the House that Ministers' written answers will have attached to them all relevant information, so that it is easily accessible to other Members as well as to members of the public who may read *Hansard*. It simply is not good enough that Ministers make reference to the "information being in the House of Commons Library". Earlier this week, however, I received a reply from the Department for Children, Schools and Families concerning the number of children who are taken into care. It is a serious subject that is of huge interest to a number of Members across the political divide as well as to members of the public, and the information referred to was not so long and complex that it could not have been made easily accessible and published in *Hansard*. Will the Deputy Leader of the House undertake to have a word with the Children's Secretary, while he still is the Children's Secretary, to ensure that in future his Department supplies all relevant information in a format that is easily accessible to other Members and to members of the public?

Chris Bryant: I am absolutely sure that the hon. Gentleman is right. Ministers should not provide an answer that refers somebody to some obscure, other document, even if it is in the public domain. That is why I am happy to write again to Ministers and to ensure that we speak to the Cabinet Secretary, so that civil servants, via the permanent secretaries, also understand

the expectation that hon. Members should not be fobbed off with a half or two-thirds answer, but receive a full answer. My only hesitation is that, before the Government came into power, in 1996-97, there were only 18,439 written questions; in the last Session, however, there were 73,357. Departments have to manage the process properly, so that we have high-quality, timely, faithful and honest answers in every case.

European Scrutiny

2. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of arrangements for the scrutiny by the House of legislation brought forward under the European Communities Act 1972. [277947]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Bryant): EU legislation, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows because she has been around for a while, is transposed into domestic law by a variety of means, including primary legislation, secondary legislation under the 1972 Act and other secondary legislation. We continue to keep the effectiveness of all those methods under review and are happy to listen to proposals for improvement.

Miss McIntosh: The hon. Gentleman will be well advised to take advice from his right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House on the charm factor when responding to questions. He may or may or not be aware that the Government are considering removing part of the draft Flood and Water Management Bill that is before the House and introducing it in secondary legislation under the 1972 Act. Does he share my concern that that process does not allow for the same parliamentary scrutiny as a Public Bill Committee? It is highly regrettable in that regard. The legislation is not contentious, and that is why we should expedite and introduce the main—not a draft—Flood and Water Management Bill, rather than use secondary legislation, which is not subject to proper parliamentary scrutiny.

Chris Bryant: I did not intend to disparage the hon. Lady; I was merely trying to reinforce the view—of the whole House, I am sure—that she has considerable experience and expertise and brings wisdom to all her comments. She has made an important point, although she has completely and utterly misunderstood the Government's intentions on the particular issue in question. As she knows, we are committed to providing a draft legislative programme, and we will publish it in the not-too-distant future. We will consult on it around the country so that people will be able to put their views on precisely how we should proceed with the measures. We have also introduced the whole process of pre-legislative scrutiny, which gives the hon. Lady the opportunity to make precisely the points that she has made.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Today, the whole nation should be looking at what is coming out of Europe that will affect this country. One of the crucial things to recognise is that transposing European legislation is a passive act of turning what comes concretely from Brussels into facts on the ground in this country. Should not the crucial message to the House and the Government be that we must ensure that that legislation is well and truly scrutinised before it is firmed up in Europe, so that when it comes to this country it is in a form that we can make best use of?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, of course. However, we often transpose EU legislation into UK law not through statutory instruments but through primary legislation. A classic example at the moment is the Coroners and Justice Bill, which transposes large elements of the services directive. Similarly, it is sometimes appropriate for us to bring forward provisions such as the Swine Vesicular Disease Regulations 2009 through statutory instruments; we want to ensure that, after consultation, there is clarity and swiftness around the country in respect of such provisions.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Parliamentary Access

3. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps the House of Commons Commission is taking to ensure unimpeded access to and from the parliamentary estate for hon. Members and staff at all times. [277948]

Nick Harvey (North Devon): As you have said in the House, Mr. Speaker, the Serjeant at Arms is your contact with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis on all such matters. The Serjeant at Arms continues to impress on the Metropolitan police the need and requirement for vehicle and pedestrian access to the parliamentary estate to be maintained.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: As the House is well aware, recently the Tamil demonstration and protest meant that the access of Members and staff to the House was completely cut off and for long periods was greatly restricted. Only this week, owing to a demonstration by cyclists—representing the Green party and campaigning in the European elections, I understand—Bridge street was closed for a period, thus greatly inconveniencing Members of Parliament.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): And the public!

Sir Nicholas Winterton: And the public as well. Only this week, the very entrance to the House of Commons has been blocked by odd mavericks and others seeking to inconvenience—perhaps even arrest—Members of Parliament. Is it not time that the police, who appear to be completely unable to deal with the situation, developed a strategy and tactics to enable them to ensure that Members and staff of the House, and the public, have unimpeded access to the House of Commons?

Nick Harvey: We are aware of the instance to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but obviously policing on London's streets is a matter for the Metropolitan police. The service says that it has to give a proportionate response, which, in the light of complaints about the policing of protests, is understandable. However, we will continue to make clear to the service the need for Members to be able to get in and out of the House at all times. For the time being at least, protests in Parliament square are legal and legitimate. If the hon. Gentleman

and others wish to see a change in the disposition of the law, there may be legislative opportunities to which they will wish to contribute.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I have some grave concerns about what is going on in Parliament square, not least because this is very much an iconic building and we have a lot of tourists who want to visit this area. Equally, I do not entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton), in that I think peaceful protest is an important part of the process as well. I want to stress to the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) that rules are already in place. There should be no encampment, as there has been of Tamil demonstrators in the past seven weeks, and there should be no more than 50 protestors at any one time. The police already have considerable powers in this regard, and they should be properly exercised.

Nick Harvey: We will continue a dialogue with the police, and the Serjeant at Arms will continue to make clear to them the need to sustain access to the Palace.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): Although I can well understand Members' irritation about this, I, too, impress on the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) the need to recognise that there is a balance to be struck between the convenience of Members and the legitimate right to peaceful protest, and to ensure that whatever solution is found to the current issues out there, that balance is struck.

Nick Harvey: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. However, I stress again that any change to the legislation is a matter for this House, while the detailed arrangements for policing the streets are a matter for the Metropolitan police, and the Serjeant at Arms will continue to impress upon them the need to maintain access.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Is it not a fact that the licence for the noisy use of amplified broadcasting equipment ran out long ago, and that no enforcement of the existing laws is being carried out? As long ago as October, we were promised in this House that legislation was imminent. When are we going to see it?

Nick Harvey: The timing of legislation is not a matter for me. The Joint Committee on the Constitutional Renewal Bill has been looking at the provisions, and we await with interest the legislation's coming before the House.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

Business of the House

5. **Simon Hughes** (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): If she will bring forward proposals to establish a business committee to determine the House's business; and if she will make a statement. [277954]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Bryant): Confidence in Parliament has certainly taken a hit in recent months, and the questions of timetabling and a business committee, which are being considered by the Procedure Committee, are ones that we need to address, bringing together Members from all parts of the House.

Simon Hughes: I am grateful for that more conciliatory response to the question than I have heard from the Minister before. Given that the Prime Minister is now clear that constitutional reform needs to go more quickly, and that the public seem clear that Parliament and the Government should be separate so that we can do our job in holding the Government to account, I hope that Ministers will now be positive about the business of Parliament—the House of Commons—being determined by Parliament, not by Government, and will be very supportive of this proposal.

Chris Bryant: Obviously, the Government are the Government only because they have a majority in Parliament. That makes the system that we have to have in this country somewhat different from that in some other countries, particularly those where there is no one party with a majority. The hon. Gentleman and others have made interesting points on this issue, and we want to ensure that that debate can be carried forward properly. In our present system, we have substantial measures to ensure that elements of the business are not decided entirely by Government but by the Opposition. Indeed, my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House is about to announce several days coming up that have not been determined by Government at all.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for North Devon, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Freedom of Information Act

6. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): How much has been spent from the House of Commons administration vote on completed administrative and legal challenges to decisions of the Information Commissioner, the Information Tribunal and the courts made in respect of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. [277955]

Nick Harvey (North Devon): Legal actions have incurred external costs to the administration estimate of £55,361 to date. The internal costs associated with legal challenges are absorbed within the cost of running the House administration and cannot be separately identified. The figure does not include costs charged to the Members' estimate.

Andrew Selous: A number of my constituents have asked whether that sum might be paid back out of existing budgets of the House of Commons. Is that possible?

Nick Harvey: I am unclear what the hon. Gentleman means. To whom would it be paid back, and by whom? If the money were paid to the Treasury from the House of Commons administration estimate, then it would be going round in a circle. I cannot see what public interest would be served by such a transaction.

Business of the House

11.34 am

Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House to give us the future business of the House?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 8 JUNE—Motion to approve the seventh report from the Standards and Privileges Committee on Unauthorised Disclosure of Heads of Report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, followed by Second Reading of the Health Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 9 JUNE—Opposition day [12th allotted day]. There will be a debate on youth crime followed by a debate on housing policy. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

WEDNESDAY 10 JUNE—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Geneva Conventions and United Nations Personnel (Protocols) Bill [*Lords*], followed by Opposition day [Unallotted half-day]. There will be a half-day debate on a motion relating to the Dissolution of Parliament in the name of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru.

THURSDAY 11 JUNE—Topical debate: subject to be announced, followed by a general debate on social mobility and fair access to the professions.

FRIDAY 12 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 15 June will include:

MONDAY 15 JUNE—Opposition day [13th allotted day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion: subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 16 JUNE—A general debate on European Affairs.

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE—Mr. Speaker's valedictory and tributes by the House, followed by consideration of Lords Amendments.

THURSDAY 18 JUNE—Topical debate: subject to be announced—followed by general debate: subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 19 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 22 June will include:

MONDAY 22 JUNE—The House will meet to elect a Speaker.

TUESDAY 23 JUNE—Second Reading of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [*Lords*].

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 25 June and 2 July will be:

THURSDAY 25 JUNE—A debate on the report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights entitled "A Bill of Rights for the UK?"

THURSDAY 2 JULY—A debate on the European Commission's annual policy strategy.

Alan Duncan: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business.

Although we recognise that the Government rather seem to have some other priorities at the moment, may I gently remind the right hon. and learned Lady that a Government are for governing? Will she therefore give us a statement on the whereabouts of the draft legislative programme? Last year it was published on 14 May, but so far this year there is no sign of it. Will she confirm that the concept of publishing the legislation in advance has been quietly scrapped, or is it perhaps just the case that this Government have run out of steam and have nothing left to offer?

Similarly, may we have a statement on the Business Secretary's Postal Services Bill? It received a surprise—perhaps we could call it emergency—First Reading in this place on 21 May, only a day after its Third Reading in another place. Then we were given to understand from reports in the media that certain Cabinet Ministers—I am sure that neither the Labour Chief Whip nor the right hon. and learned Lady is among them—regard the Bill as "totally bonkers". Now we learn from her statement that no Second Reading is planned in the next fortnight. Can she tell the House when that is going to happen?

May we have an urgent statement from the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform on the fate of Vauxhall and the jobs of more than 5,000 workers, which hang in the balance? There was a great flurry of activity on our TV screens earlier this week by the Business Secretary, who assured us about the future of the company. Yet while he has chosen not to give Parliament an update, reports today suggest that the Luton plant has now been classified as "at risk" by trade unions. At the risk of sounding churlish, may I point out that over the past 24 hours the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform has seemed rather more interested in saving the Prime Minister's job than the jobs of British car workers. May we have a statement on that delicate situation as it affects the car industry in the United Kingdom?

On the subject of unemployment, may we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on premium line telephone costs for Jobcentre Plus? As we have all feared, the number of people out of work has been steadily increasing over the past few months, but the Government are not making it any easier for those who are looking for work. They are being charged to dial in, hang on for ages and then often just get cut off. It ends up costing them a lot of money just to have an initial conversation on the phone. How does the right hon. and learned Lady justify charging people who have little income high rates—or even at all—for seeking advice on getting a job, particularly in the depths of one of the deepest recessions the country has seen?

May I request yet again an urgent debate on the Government's handling of compensation for those who lost out from Equitable Life, another group of people whom the Government have so shamefully ignored? Twenty years ago, the then shadow Trade and Industry Secretary, who now happens to be Prime Minister, stood at this very Dispatch Box and spoke about Barlow Clowes and the ombudsman's report on that. He condemned the

> "fecklessness, gullibility and incompetence of the Government who, for months and years, ignored all the warnings".—[*Official Report*, 19 December 1989; Vol. 164, c. 204-5.]

How can the Government dishonour their obligations to Equitable Life policyholders when their stance in Opposition was so different on such a similar issue?

Will the Leader of the House consider a debate on countries in the middle east and around that region that are at risk of failure, such as Somalia and particularly Yemen? I and many others fear that there is, once again, a danger of Yemen dividing between north and south and spreading instability in the area.

May we also have a debate on educational standards? It is noticeable in the public exchange of letters between the right hon. Member for Salford (Hazel Blears) and the Prime Minister that neither makes use of that basic staple of punctuation, the full stop. As one of Tony Blair's former speech writers said in *The Times* today,

"New Labour began with no verbs and it ends with no punctuation."

Is that another tacit admission that the Government have ground to a complete full stop?

Finally, may I say on this day that whatever our political differences and persuasions—and whatever difficulties Parliament has been experiencing—for the sake of democracy, let us join together across the Chamber in urging everyone to get out and vote, and to do it for positive reasons for a positive agenda for the future of the country?

Ms Harman: I absolutely agree with the point that the shadow Leader of the House has just made about the importance of our democracy and of everybody getting out to vote.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the draft legislative programme. This will be the third year in which we publish the programme, instead of leaving it until the Queen's Speech, by which time a programme is set in tablets of stone, the ink has dried and there is no opportunity for people to participate in discussions about what should be in it. We intend, for the third year running, to publish the draft legislative programme in advance. The elections on 4 June and the rules about the purdah that surrounds them mean that we have not been able to publish it in the six weeks immediately prior to them. Publication has therefore been delayed, but it will happen shortly.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Postal Services Bill. I have announced the business for next week, and as he knows, the business for the following weeks is provisional.

The shadow Leader of the House mentioned Vauxhall and the car industry, which is very important. Indeed, the Prime Minister addressed the matter in Prime Minister's questions yesterday, and it has been raised often in the House. We are very concerned about the car industry, particularly the plants at Luton and Ellesmere Port. We are concerned about not only those who work in those important plants but all those who supply the industry and the skill base that it supports. The hon. Gentleman knows that there has been big backing through Government loans under the automotive assistance scheme, in addition to the general help for business, and that the Business Secretary has held discussions to ensure that we do everything we can to secure those jobs, against the changing background for General Motors. It is important to appreciate that we do not believe in the recession taking its course, but in active Government intervention. We do not believe in cutting back, but in borrowing to back up loans to support business that is in difficulty. We also believe in working across Europe to ensure that we do well out of our work in co-operation with other European countries.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point about help for the unemployed through phone lines, so that they can call jobcentres. I will raise that with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, but let me say two things now. If we are to help the unemployed who, through no fault of their own, have lost their jobs as a result of the global financial crisis, it is important that we put extra investment into jobcentres. That is why we have put £1.2 billion extra into jobcentres to help people. The extra resources going into jobcentres, which the hon. Gentleman's party has opposed, should ensure that we can provide a good service, not only face to face but on telephone lines.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Equitable Life. He will know that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury updated the House in the debate in Westminster Hall on 19 May on the progress that Sir John Chadwick has made in looking into the compensation scheme for those who have lost out under Equitable Life.

The hon. Gentleman also raised an important point about the destabilisation in Yemen and Somalia. I will discuss that with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and see whether there will be an opportunity to update the House, whether by written or oral statement, or by way of a debate.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Can we have a debate on the responsibilities of householders when planting trees in their gardens which subsequently cause damage to the drains and foundations of neighbouring properties? I have talked to hon. Members across the House, and there seems to be a problem across the country, particularly when people plant ornamental trees such as ornamental eucalyptus. Insurance companies are increasingly including clauses that exclude householders from claiming when their properties suffer damage, yet those who plant the trees can walk away scot-free. Can we look into that, please?

Ms Harman: I think that that matter comes under the auspices of the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is obviously a concern to my hon. Friend's constituents, and it has also been raised with other hon. Members by their constituents, so it might be a matter on which she should seek a Westminster Hall debate.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I associate my party with the right hon. and learned Lady's important remarks about everyone getting out there to vote today, both in the European elections and in the local elections—for people who live where those are taking place—and about the importance of taking part in our democracy.

The Leader of the House has given us the business for almost three weeks, which is a welcome new development that I hope will continue in future. The more the House can be informed of business far ahead of time, the more people outside this House will know how to influence that business. However, she also said that everything beyond next week was very provisional. Is that subject to the vote next Wednesday on the Dissolution of Parliament?

[Sir Robert Smith]

On the subject of that debate on the Dissolution, Prime Minister's questions has been the only opportunity that the Prime Minister has had to deal with the question of why he does not want to have an election now. Often his answer seems to be because he would lose it, but he has not had the chance to expand on his reasons for not responding to the country's wish for an election. To that end, will the Leader of the House ensure that the appropriate Minister replies to the debate next Wednesday—and obviously the Prime Minister would be the most appropriate Minister to reply to such a debate, so will she ensure that he comes and gives a full explanation, both to the House and to the country, of his views on that Dissolution motion?

Perhaps the reason why the Leader of the House said that the business was provisional is that she was tantalising us with the prospect of the Postal Services Bill appearing in the provisional business for the following week. It is vital for the future of the Post Office and Royal Mail that the Government should come forward with proper and effective means of getting investment into those companies. However, we also need a Bill that protects the Post Office and ensures that after all the upheaval in the post office network, it is not further damaged by the Government.

In engaging with the public, the Government are quite keen on the use of petitions in local government. Last year the Government agreed with the Procedure Committee that we should have a modern e-petitioning system for Parliament. When will the Government ensure that that agreement is delivered, so that Parliament can have a functioning e-petitioning system?

Finally, President Obama is making a major statement in the middle east today on relations with the Islamic world. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Foreign Secretary comes to the House to make a statement on the implications for the UK's policy in the middle east of what President Obama says today?

Ms Harman: The question of who responds to the Opposition day debate next week is a matter for the Government—

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): You are the Government!

Ms Harman: Quite so, but it is not a matter of House business. Therefore the Government will decide, and put forward the appropriate person.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith) made a big point about the business for next week being announced whereas the business for the following weeks was provisional. Because he is standing in for the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), and because he is new to business questions, perhaps he does not realise that we always announce the business for the next week firmly, and the business for any subsequent weeks is always provisional. In order to help the House we try, whenever possible, to give as much notice of the business as we can, and to announce the provisional business as far ahead as possible. None the less, the hon. Gentleman has raised an important point: if people outside the House know what the business is going to be, it enables them to engage in the debate.

One of the good outcomes of the awful scandal about the abuse of MPs' allowances will be that we have an opportunity to look afresh at all the processes in the House. Included in that will be how, and how far ahead, we announce the business, what mechanism we use to decide on the business, and what we should do about e-petitions. This will be a good moment for us to look afresh at all those issues on a cross-party basis.

The hon. Gentleman asked how the House could be updated on the middle east. I will include that matter when I discuss the points raised by the shadow Leader of the House on Yemen and Somalia. He also asked about the Royal Mail. Of course we are determined to protect the Royal Mail, and to invest in and protect the post office network.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): The Education Service in the House of Commons offers subsidised travel to schools wishing to visit Parliament. This is very popular with schools in Stockport, but the service is heavily oversubscribed, with the subsidy being allocated almost immediately on the day when applications open. Will my right hon. and learned Friend look into this to see whether more subsidy could be made available, so that schools such as Lark Hill and Alexandra Park can visit Parliament and enjoy the excellent educational tours offered in the House of Commons?

Ms Harman: The opportunities for other people to come into the House and see the work that we do have improved massively over recent years, but there is an opportunity for us to review the situation. The more people understand about the work that their constituency MP does in the House of Commons the better, and providing schoolchildren with a better understanding of the House helps them to understand history as well as the modern processes of government. Enabling people from all parts of the United Kingdom not to be debarred from coming to the House on the ground of cost is something that we can look at on a cross-party basis.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West) (Con): The Prime Minister has been making much of his proposals for constitutional reform and for a code of conduct for hon. Members—but in forums other than this one. Are we to be favoured with a statement about these proposals, so that we can scrutinise them?

Ms Harman: I made a statement about the proposals that came out of the meeting of the three party leaders, at which the Prime Minister suggested that we have a parliamentary standards authority to regulate the question of expenses. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the House should have an opportunity, sooner rather than later, to engage in the debate on how we review and improve the processes of the House, as well as considering the wider constitutional questions. He will know that there is a Constitutional Renewal Bill in the legislative programme. It has already been considered in draft by a Committee of both Houses, and it will provide a vehicle for further debate and discussion. No doubt more issues will come before the House shortly.

Colin Challen (Morley and Rothwell) (Lab): I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend—who is one of the calmer voices in the House—will be aware of calls from outside and within the House for a shorter

summer recess this year. I hope that she will not mind my adding my voice to those calls. I would like to suggest that we come back here in September to hear an early Queen's Speech proposing the Government's next legislative programme—including a proportional representation Bill to be enacted in time for the next general election.

Ms Harman: It is right that we have the opportunity to debate again our democracy and all the processes that underpin it. My hon. Friend talks about changing the dates to shorten the summer recess, but I think that it is very important that any changes we make in the House do nothing to undermine the constituency link—[Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] I am talking about the rootedness of Members of Parliament in their own constituencies. We need to scotch the idea—I am not saying that my hon. Friend was suggesting this; I know that he was not—that when we are not in the House, working in Committees or in the Chamber, we are all on holiday. At those times there is an opportunity—I would say an obligation—for Members to be in their constituencies working with their constituents. If we had shorter summer recesses, we would have more time in the House and less time in our constituencies. One of the things that we need to do is to make this clearer across the piece, so that our constituents can see the work that we do in our constituencies, as well as the work that we do in the House.

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): May I associate myself with the request that the hon. Member for Morley and Rothwell (Colin Challen) has just made?

Car parking charges at Stepping Hill hospital in Stockport, which serves my constituency and those of several other Members, have been dramatically increased, suddenly and without warning. They have gone up from £1.50 for three hours to £2 for two hours, £3 for two to four hours, and £5 for more than four hours. This is a problem not only for those who have to pay the charges; it is also bad news for those who live in the surrounding area, who are now suffering even more as people look for an alternative to those parking arrangements at the hospital. Is it not about time we had a debate on the scandal of car parking charges at our hospitals?

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman has given an example of how a constituency Member of Parliament dealing with a foundation hospital can have a big impact through representing local people who want changes in the car park charging policy. I suggest that he take up this matter directly with the foundation hospital. He will no doubt be supported by other hon. Members whose constituents use the hospital.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): Can we have a debate about the rise of the far right in Europe, and of those on the newly emerging fruitcake right who seem to believe that climate change is a myth, and homosexuality an illness? I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend would have no truck with those parties, but the official Opposition seem determined to become a new ingredient in the fruitcake.

Ms Harman: We will be having a debate prior to the European Council, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will take that opportunity to catch the Speaker's eye and participate in that debate, and to make the point that we all need to work together in the interests of Britain's economy, of the environment and of protecting ourselves against international crime. We have to work together in Europe, and siding with what my hon. Friend describes as a few fruitcake parties from the far right would not be in the interests of the people of this country.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): May I warmly congratulate the Leader of the House on her remarks about the link between Members of Parliament and their respective constituencies? That link is vital to the parliamentary system in this country. Is she also aware that there have been calls today, not only from the Conservatives, for the more meaningful involvement of Back Benchers in the business of the House?

I refer particularly to the establishment of a business Committee, which could go much wider in representing the House than the current rather informal business committee. Will she give serious thought to that suggestion? Is it not an appropriate subject for an important debate? Could we not consider merging the Modernisation Committee, which she leads, with the Procedure Committee, which could achieve so many of the things that both she and the Prime Minister have talked about to improve democracy?

Ms Harman: As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Rothwell (Colin Challen), we should take the opportunity to look again at the mechanism for arranging House business. As Leader of the House, I would welcome the views of all parties on the matter.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester, South) (Lab): Given the recent media interest in how public money is spent on the pay and allowances of those in public life, may we have a debate on the pay and other remuneration of BBC superstars and on the irony of the corporation's use of the familiar pretext of the Data Protection Act to seek to prevent openness and transparency in public life? In such a debate, may we have the chance to say to the BBC, on the basis of some recent experience, that resisting the public's legitimate right to know how their money is being used to remunerate all those in public life is likely to end in tears?

Ms Harman: When public money is spent, the public are entitled to know about it, and salaries for presenters at the BBC are paid for out of public money. Now I have heard it argued that it would be invidious to publish those salaries because it would prompt competition from commercial organisations that might try to head-hunt those presenters. However, that risk applies to everyone in public service—the salaries of permanent secretaries, for example, are published and they, too, could be head-hunted by the private sector. However, many people work in the public sector because they believe in public service broadcasting or the important work of the public sector more widely. I do not buy the argument that salaries cannot be published because of commercial confidentiality because it seems to me that the issue goes further than the Data Protection Act. I believe that gagging clauses are drawn up to prevent BBC presenters from disclosing the salaries that they have negotiated, but the Equality Bill contains a clause to ban such gagging clauses because we do not think it appropriate for employers and employees to be bound not to reveal

[Ms Harman]

information about pay—not least because that might provide an opportunity for pay discrimination between men and women.

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time about "phoenixism"—in other words, going out of business one day and going back into business a few days later, doing almost exactly the same thing, leaving creditors unpaid and customers without the goods and services they have paid for? Does the Leader of the House agree that the House should discuss this matter particularly now, when this pernicious practice is resulting in many of our constituents being unable to recover money they can ill afford to lose?

Ms Harman: When someone goes out of business, that affects other businesses in the supply chain, as the hon. Gentleman said. Perhaps he could raise this matter again in the debate immediately after business questions, which is about supporting business through these difficult times.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): I return to President Obama's highly significant speech in Cairo this morning. Bearing in mind that our country is still probably America's closest ally and has huge interests in the middle east, and given that the Leader of the House has said that the topical debate for Thursday has not yet been decided, may I suggest that there could not be anything more topical than a debate on the middle east, particularly in view of the American President's speech, and that it should be led by the Foreign Secretary, if he is available?

Ms Harman: I will certainly take that as a constructive suggestion for next week's topical debate.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): May I push the Leader of the House again on the question of the timing of the Postal Services Bill? If the Government are intent on proceeding with the part-privatisation of the Royal Mail, they need to get on with it because the private sector partners cannot tolerate the uncertainty. If, on the other hand and as well-informed sources suggest, the Government have abandoned those plans, the Bill is still necessary in other respects, particularly to deal with regulatory issues surrounding the winding up of Postcomm and its merger into Ofcom. We still need the Bill and we need to get on with it very quickly.

Ms Harman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Bill introduced in the other place has completed its passage there, so it is available to be brought before the House. It is not in next week's business, so I am afraid that he will have to wait until next week's business statement to see whether it is part of business for the future. I appreciate him making those comments—by saying that I may seem to be breaking the spirit of what I said to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith). I am aware of that paradox.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have previously asked the right hon. and learned Lady whether we could have a debate on the impact assessment, or the cost-benefit analysis, of the Climate Change Act 2008. It showed that costs had doubled to £400 billion since the Act came into force and that the Secretary of State had accidentally mislaid £1 trillion of benefits. Thanks perhaps to the intervention of the Leader of the House, for which I am grateful, the Secretary of State has written to me saying that we could debate these issues in connection with statutory instruments on carbon budgets. Those have been debated in the other place, so will she tell us when they are going to be debated in this place? Can she assure us that they will be debated on the Floor of the House and can she tell us whether they result from the Climate Change Act 2008—and are therefore something that the House could reject in principle if it so wished—or, as the text of the statutory instrument suggests, they come instead from the European Union Climate and Energy Package? If so, the Government have produced a separate cost-benefit analysis for this package on that basis, which therefore means that although we could go through the charade of debating them, we could never reject them.

Ms Harman: I will raise this issue with my colleagues in the relevant Department. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has raised the matter on a previous occasion. It might be necessary for him to meet the Deputy Leader of the House and the appropriate departmental Minister in order to sort out the process issues. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman is trying to ensure that the processes are right for dealing with the matter.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Whatever the turbulence in this place, 20 years ago in Tiananmen Square, according to the Chinese Red Cross, 2,500 young people had their lives snuffed out. Even this morning, journalists trying to enter Tiananmen Square were manhandled by the Chinese police. May we have a debate about human rights in China and how we can encourage the Chinese, who wish to become a modern country and a part of our modern society, to revise their internal policing and freedom policies?

Ms Harman: Given that there are major human rights concerns that go beyond the roughly 30 people who, 20 years after the tragic events in Tiananmen Square, still remain in detention, it might be appropriate for a topical debate in the near future. Given the major human rights issues also arising in Burma, we might be able to combine the two and debate them together.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): On 27 April, the new motorcycle driving test, including the controversial 50 kph swerve and stop aspect, was finally introduced. During the first three weeks of the test's operation, there have been 11 incidents—10 involving injury—and three people have had to be admitted to hospital. Will the Secretary of State for Transport, whoever he or she may be by next week, make a statement so that Members can raise the questions that need to be asked about this particular disturbing problem?

Ms Harman: I will raise the issue with Ministers in the Department for Transport and try to find out whether they believe a written ministerial statement or a letter to the hon. Gentleman would be the most appropriate means to deal with his request.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): May we have a statement from the Leader of the House on the selection of topics to be debated on days when major elections, such as the European and county council

elections today, are going on? She knows that I am a great admirer of the way she discharges her duty as Leader of the House and I cannot believe that she would have wanted the "Defence in the World" debate—the most important defence debate of the year—to be scheduled on a day like today. If she cannot resolve the problem herself, will she have a word with the leader of her party, whoever that may be, in the next few days?

Ms Harman: All of us in the House believe in the importance of democracy, and we believe in it not just for the election of Members of the House, but for the election of local councillors and Members of the European Parliament. That is why there are so few Members in the House when local elections or elections to the European Parliament take place. Traditionally, that has been responded to by an effort to ensure that there is no controversial business and no need for a vote at the end of business. That means that we will be debating the important subject of the economy when few Members are in the House. There is an opportunity to look afresh at a lot of issues. If we think that there is no opportunity for serious debate in the House on election days such as this, perhaps the House should not be sitting. We need to consider that.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): May we have a debate about Gibraltar following worrying news that Brussels has begun to recognise Spanish claims to the Rock in assigning to Spain territorial waters around Gibraltar as an environmental protection zone that Spain is apparently to police? This has already caused a stand-off—between the British patrol vessel HMS Sabre and the Spanish corvette Tarifa earlier this month. Some urgency is involved in the matter, yet we have heard nothing from the Government.

Ms Harman: In the provisional business, I announced for 16 June a debate on European affairs. The hon. Gentleman might seek to catch Mr. Speaker's eye to intervene in that debate and get a response from a Foreign Office Minister.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Amidst the furore over parliamentary expenses and allowances during the past four weeks, it has perhaps been forgotten that each and every day the Government are borrowing—not spending, but borrowing—£450 million.

May we have a debate in Government time on this country's interdependence with a number of other nations, especially China, which my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) referred to, and several nations in the middle east? We have such tremendous interdependence to ensure that our bonds and gilts can be sold in the international markets, and that borrowing is being funded by other nations that have an important ongoing economic relationship with us. Will the Government hold a debate in their own time on that important economic phenomenon?

Ms Harman: The Prime Minister and other Ministers have led the way in recognising that the response to the global financial crisis needs to be global. That is why the G20 summit, which the Prime Minister hosted in London, was called. In support of the extra borrowing, I would say that it has been necessary for the purposes of backing up the car industry and providing extra investment to help those who are going to jobcentres, and to protect many of the issues that hon. Members have raised.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on organisations within the police force that undermine cohesion? We already have the deeply divisive National Black Police Association and West Yorkshire police has just announced that it is forming an association of Muslim police. I suggest to the Leader of the House that those organisations are extremely unhelpful, deeply divisive and do nothing to promote community cohesion and the principle of integration. May we have a debate on that issue, because many of my constituents and many people in my part of the world find such things entirely unacceptable?

Ms Harman: It is important to ensure that there is proper policing that is as effective as it possibly can be, and that the public have confidence in and work in support of the police. That is only helped by having a police force that reflects and is part of the communities that it serves, which is why it is important to have more black, Asian and Muslim police. Therefore, those associations are important for increasing recruitment and diversity in our police services, whether in Yorkshire or in London.

The Economy (Supporting Business)

Topical debate

12.14 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the economy: supporting business.

British businesses are fundamental to our success and prosperity as a nation and supporting businesses through these tough times has been, is and will continue to be a priority for the Government. As many commentators have said, what makes this downturn different from those seen in the past is the fact that it is not a domestic problem, or a problem restricted to a small number of countries, but global.

World gross domestic product is forecast to contract by around 1.25 per cent. this year—the first full-year shrinkage since the second world war—and many of our international partners are in recession. In the first quarter of this year, the UK economy shrank by 1.9 per cent. Across the EU, the fall was 2.4 per cent. Germany saw a contraction of twice that in the UK in the first quarter, and the Japanese economy contracted by 4 per cent.

This downturn is hurting people and businesses, but the Government are not ducking the hard questions. We led the world in taking action to stabilise the banking system. We have put in place a £20 billion fiscal stimulus package to boost the economy. We have introduced a range of targeted measures to provide real help to businesses, individuals and families.

As the International Monetary Fund noted in its annual statement on the UK economy, our response has been bold and wide ranging, and it has helped to contain the impact of the global crisis on the country. The fact that this downturn is global means that we need global action as well as action on the home front. That is why the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have worked with our international partners to ensure that we have a co-ordinated global response to the economic crisis.

In April at the G20 summit meeting in London, agreement was reached on collective action that is necessary to mitigate the risk of an even more severe downturn while reshaping the financial system, preserving the world trading system and laying the foundations for a sustainable recovery.

The London summit was an important step in the journey towards restored stability and economic growth globally, and the Government are committed to ensuring that further progress is made between now and the next meeting of leaders to be held in the US in September.

Here at home, we have taken decisive steps to support the UK's financial system, given its fundamental importance to the basic functioning of our economy, and to provide real help for people and businesses.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): I hope that the Minister will still be in post this time next week so that he can give evidence to my Committee on the automotive assistance programme. Is he aware of concern in the automotive supply chain that the French and German Governments are giving much more direct help to that supply chain to protect it? Will he tell the House what grants and sums have been disbursed under the automotive assistance programme, and how many companies have been assisted by it?

Ian Pearson: I will come to the automotive assistance programme in a moment as part of the wider context of measures that the Government are taking, but I want to make the point to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that, through the fiscal stimulus announced in the pre-Budget report and the actions we took in October and January to support the banking system, we are helping businesses by beginning to replace the lending capacity lost due to the withdrawal from the UK economy of foreign banks and other institutions.

This year's Budget went further in providing a stimulus to the economy as a whole, and in total we will provide fiscal support worth 4 per cent. of GDP in 2009-10. All in all, the UK has one of the largest programmes of fiscal support in the G20 in 2009.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): To help small businesses in particular, which are suffering a recession through no fault of their own, could not the Government take away, or at least suspend, some of the regulatory burdens to enable businesses to come out the other side? If they do not do that, they will be strangling those businesses, which will never have an opportunity to recover.

Ian Pearson: The Government have a strong track record in better regulation. At the moment, small businesses really want help with their cash flow, new customers and the economy to get moving again. The actions that the Government are taking are all designed to achieve that.

Mr. Greg Hands (Hammersmith and Fulham) (Con): Taking the Minister back to his point about boosting lending, surely he must have seen the figures released earlier this week showing that lending to consumers and businesses in the economy is at a low not seen since 1997.

Ian Pearson: Let me come on to lending directly. Although we have taken action, which has been opposed by the Conservative party, at a macro-economic level to provide a stimulus to the economy, it takes time to have effect. In addition, the Bank of England has reduced interest rates to the lowest level in our history, at 0.5 per cent., £125 billion of quantitative easing has been provided, and the current sterling exchange rate is highly competitive internationally. Those measures take time to filter through to the real economy, which is why help is needed now.

If the hon. Gentleman wants to question me further about lending, I would be happy to take a further intervention. As he will be aware, a number of banks have announced plans to increase lending to households and businesses this year. HSBC will make £15 billion in mortgages available in 2009, and is allocating £1 billion in extra loans to small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK. Barclays recently said it would lend a further £5.5 billion to businesses this year, on top of a similar amount to individuals, and Northern Rock and several other lenders are following similar courses.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have ensured that banks that have received Government support commit to freeing up credit as part of the contractual terms. As

part of their participation in the asset protection scheme, Lloyds Banking Group and RBS have been required to sign legally binding agreements. Lloyds will lend about £11 billion extra to businesses this year and next and RBS about £16 billion, at commercial terms. That represents a significant pool of new lending available to business.

Mr. Hands: The Minister is being most generous in giving way. A little earlier, he was claiming the credit for the independent Bank of England's cut in interest rates, yet most businesses will not borrow at 0.5 per cent. on account of the continuing large credit spreads in the economy. What does he think about long-term interest rates at 4.5 per cent., which is nine times the short-term interest rates? The rates available for businesses to borrow at, assuming that they can find a bank willing to lend the money, are far higher than the 0.5 per cent. he quoted.

Ian Pearson: I was not seeking to take credit for the actions of the Bank of England, which, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, is independent from Government. I was merely noting that on top of the fiscal stimulus introduced by the Government, the aggressive actions taken by the Bank, and the level of interest rates, are all big macro-economic factors supporting the economy at the moment.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that interest rates are historically low, but small businesses in particular still find it difficult to access credit on terms that they find acceptable. We continue to have discussions with banks about not only the quantum of lending but the rates of interest charged. Banks must make commercial decisions according to their assessment of risk and creditworthiness, and a market adjustment has been occurring throughout the UK economy. I do not think what is going on in the UK economy is at all different from what is going on in other advanced nations currently.

I want to mention the European Investment Bank and the onward lending to the small business community successfully negotiated by the Government. The UK's share of overall EIB lending to small and medium-sized enterprises has already increased from 2.2 per cent. in 2007 to 12.3 per cent. in 2008, as part of a four-year deal that has been negotiated. It is also worth noting the Government's enterprise finance guarantee scheme, which a number of Opposition Members criticised for being slow to spend, is proving extremely popular with businesses, and we are confident that it will support about £1.3 billion of bank lending to smaller firms this year. The most recent figures I have suggest that about £420 million of eligible applications from more than 3,800 firms have been granted or are being processed or assessed. More than 2,650 businesses have been offered loans totalling more than £250 million. The scheme is therefore popular.

On top of that, the Government introduced the trade credit insurance scheme in the Budget. From May 2009 until the end of the year, suppliers are being given the chance to purchase six months' top-up insurance from private insurers, who are providing it on the Government's behalf up to an aggregate limit of £5 billion. That is real help being provided to business.

Peter Luff *rose—*

Ian Pearson: If I may, I will mention the support for the automotive industry, which the hon. Gentleman raised. I will happily appear before the Business and Enterprise Committee next week to discuss the automotive assistance programme. As he will be aware, it has two parts, one of which is linked to guaranteeing loans from the European Investment Bank, and the other is a separate guarantee package. As he knows, Jaguar Land Rover has successfully applied to the European Investment Bank, and we will have discussions about the Government guarantee as part of that package. We are also in discussions with a number of automotive companies about assisting them through the automotive assistance programme. Given that the Government are providing guarantees, it is naturally up to the companies to reach agreements with the banks providing the loans, which the Government will guarantee. I hope to make announcements shortly about the AAP, but he will be aware that such deals can take a significant amount of time. When we are spending taxpayers' money, it is right that we take precautions. The team in place in the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform is working hard with a number of companies in the supply chain; and we can make a real difference to some of those companies.

The Government have also recognised that many businesses are worried about being able to meet their tax, national insurance, VAT and other payments owed to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Those businesses can call the business payment support line that we have we set up. About 131,000 businesses have now been given the leeway to defer tax payments worth more than £2.3 billion, giving them a significant breathing space during difficult times. On top of that, the Government and their agencies, as major customers for good and services that UK businesses provide, have taken steps to help to ease the cash-flow problems of suppliers, by committing to pay bills within 10 days, bringing forward an extra £8 billion of payments on top of the £58 billion already paid within 10 days.

Mr. Hands: I think the Minister said he was worried about whether businesses would be able to meet their obligations to pay national insurance. Will he therefore tell us why he is hiking national insurance up by 0.5 per cent. from next year, for employers and those employees earning more than £19,000—a tax on the many, not the few?

Ian Pearson: The hon. Gentleman knows very well what we said in the Budget about the need to provide real help to businesses and the economy now, and to provide a fiscal stimulus, but also to take a sustainable approach to the public finances. That is why we have made announcements on national insurance, top rates of income tax and pensions. The Government must make a balanced judgment on the economy and its future and ensure that we put public finances on a sustainable path. That is what we did in the Budget: taking actions now that will help people and businesses get through difficult times, while ensuring a prudent and sustainable approach to the public finances over the medium term. That, Mr. Speaker, is exactly what you would expect Government to do.

We are also setting out a strategic vision about how to provide more support to companies in the future, through our White Paper, "New Industry, New Jobs"

[Ian Pearson]

and our industrial activism approach. That is important. We will continue to develop it, and I commend it to the House.

12.29 pm

Mr. Greg Hands (Hammersmith and Fulham) (Con): What extraordinary scenes! The Government have called a debate on the economy, and the Chamber is practically empty. The Minister arrived only just in time to present the Government's case. I thought for a moment that he might have packed his bags in anticipation of the official announcement, and taken part in the DIY reshuffle that seems to have started earlier in the week. There appear to be no other Labour Members present to contribute to the debate. The Labour Benches are almost entirely empty: I see only the Whip and the Minister. There is no sign of anyone else wishing to make a speech in support of the Government's policy on the economy.

The debate takes place in unhappy circumstances. I commend in advance all the members of my own party who are hoping to speak today, but it cannot be right for the Government to try to meet the widespread demand, in the House and the country, for significant time in which we can debate the economy by presenting us with a debate lasting only an hour and a half on election day, when an empty Chamber can be almost guaranteed.

Peter Luff: Would we not have been greatly assisted if this had been a substantive motion? The House could then have expressed its view, rather than merely debating the motion.

Mr. Hands: That would indeed have been very helpful. The Government have been running away from any debate of substance on the economy for many months. It was only a full Opposition day debate on the subject in March that finally prompted the Government to call their own debate in the week before Easter. Apart from allowing the usual scheduled debates on the Budget and the Finance Bill, the Government have been running away from being scrutinised on the economy for the past six months.

The Minister tried to talk about green shoots. It is true that the rate of decline in the UK economy appears to have abated in some areas. Manufacturing industry and the service sector are not as downbeat as they were a few months ago. Nevertheless, we have already experienced the longest recession in decades, and if there is joy at seeing light at the end of the tunnel, it is mainly because we have been underground for so long.

We welcome any signs of improvement in the economy. After four quarters of no growth or negative growth, we desperately need some signs that improvement will come. We have always thought and said that growth would return in 2009, although we have questioned, and continue to question, the Government's growth forecasts for the years ahead. However, there are conflicting signs in the real economy. The Minister presented some of the highlights, which we welcome, but we should be realistic about the complete picture. Lending to companies and households fell in April for the first time since 1997. Earlier this week, the *Financial Times* commented:

"The slowdown in lending serves as a warning that while some 'green shoots' are emerging in the economy, constrained access to credit and weak demand for loans in the private sector could yet kill them off."

Unemployment continues to rise inexorably, and at its fastest rate since the second world war. The Minister's optimistic tone will not be echoed by the additional hundreds of thousands who are joining the dole queues each quarter. In March, the level of unemployment had already surpassed the forecasts for the whole of 2009 that had been made in the 2008 pre-Budget report. The Budget predicted that the claimant count would rise to 2.44 million by the end of 2010, a figure that had already exceeded by 1 million the one predicted only six months earlier in the pre-Budget report. The British Chambers of Commerce have predicted that it will reach 3.2 million by the end of 2010, and the CBI has made a similar prediction. It seems that the age-old adage—that all Labour Governments leave office with unemployment higher than when they took over—will prove to be true yet again.

If I were the Minister, I would go easy on trumpeting claims for the success of Government schemes to help people and businesses through the recession. It emerged earlier this week that just two home owners had been helped by the Government's flagship initiative to help families avoid repossession. The mortgage rescue scheme has been running since January, during which time nearly 20,000 homes are thought to have been seized, but only two households have been helped.

Let us consider two of the Government's schemes for business. I do not know whether the Government can provide more up-to-date figures, but the most recent publicly available figures suggest that the capital for enterprise fund announced in November 2008 has yet to invest a single pound in any business. Furthermore, according to the Minister for Employment Relations and Postal Affairs the £1.3 billion enterprise finance guarantee scheme has loaned just £92.6 million to industry, despite also being announced last November. That represents just 7 per cent. of the funds available. Meanwhile—and I hear this across the country—big Government rises in business rates continue to hurt.

One easy way of helping small and medium-sized enterprises would be to make small business rate relief automatic. Why did the Government oppose the private Member's Bill presented recently by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff), which would have done precisely that? As I said earlier, however, the way in which the Government could really help business is by sorting out the public finances. Unfortunately for the Government and the country, the position is going from bad to worse. We are still deep in the tunnel, with no chinks of light to be seen. Government borrowing in April—in just one month—was an incredible £8.5 billion. That is a record, and it is five times as much as was borrowed in the same month last year.

Even according to the Government's own highly questionable statistical basis, net debt has already risen from the mid-40s to 53.2 per cent. of GDP. It is at its highest level since the 53.8 per cent. that we saw when the country was shamefully bailed out by the IMF in 1976. The United Kingdom has been publicly downgraded by Standard and Poor's for the first time ever, or at least since its credit was rated for the first time in 1978. Our credit prospects are negative. That will add yet further

to our borrowing costs, especially the costs of any non-domestic borrowings. It will also shrink the investor base for our debt products, as some investors are not able to hold anything less than AAA-rated assets.

Thanks to the public finances, borrowing rates for businesses are far higher than they should be in this recession. As I said earlier, long-term interest rates are an incredible nine times higher than short-term interest rates. Credit spreads on variable-rate borrowings are still too wide. Whether we look at variable or fixed-rate funding, it is clear that the long-term funding needed by businesses is still far too expensive. Moreover, the Government are crowding out business borrowers from the capital markets with their huge gilt auctions

It seems that no one believes the Government's forecasts of a trampoline recovery. We hope and expect there to be some growth in the economy before the end of the year, but it is difficult to share the Government's optimism that there will be a 3.5 per cent. rate of growth next year. Of course we would love that to be true, but we suspect some political massaging of the figures. Indeed, I read that the Prime Minister wanted the figures to be even more fixed than those that I have cited. On Tuesday, *The Times* reported that

"the Prime Minister tried to upgrade the growth forecasts to make the economic outlook appear rosier than it was; the Chancellor refused."

We urgently need to hear from the Minister what really happened. Are the growth forecasts in the Red Book from No. 10, or are they from the Treasury? Did the Prime Minister try to intervene, as *The Times* claimed? Perhaps he intervened successfully, and those growth forecasts are the result of his intervention.

It would also be helpful to hear the Minister's response to the harsh criticisms of the Government's quantitative easing programme made earlier this week by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. She said:

"What other central banks have been doing must be reversed. I am very sceptical about the extent of the Fed's actions and the way the bank of England has carved its own little line in Europe".

That is another extraordinary attack from a foreign leader on the Government's economic policy. May I ask the Minister whether, at the G20 summit and at last month's ECOFIN meeting, Germany raised its opposition to the quantitative easing programme with the Prime Minister or the Chancellor?

Although no Labour Members except the Minister are present for it, this may well end up being an historic debate. It may well be the last debate on the economy to take place while the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, South-West (Mr. Darling) is Chancellor. This could be how it all finished: a dead-end debate slot on European election day with virtually no one present to witness the end of it all. The Chancellor would be like a modern-day Eleanor Rigby.

Instead of coming here to talk about the economy, the Chancellor is somewhere else fighting for his political survival. Britain deserves better than this, and that is why we are calling for a general election. I thank my hon. Friends in advance for participating in this debate, but the whole Conservative party wants to debate the economy, and for longer than an hour and a half; we want a full, four-week debate in a general election campaign. Moreover, a general election is what the country wants and so desperately needs.

12.40 pm

Dr. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I do not know whether this is a dead-end debate slot, but I do know that I have only six minutes to say all that needs to be said about the economy and business, and I also know how strict you are, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in enforcing such time limits. Saying all that needs to be said in such a brief period presents something of a challenge because relatively little has been said recently in either this place or the media about the economy and business. Far more has been said about the home economics of MPs. We live in a strange world at present, where a £5 claim for an offertory is given as much precedence in terms of newspaper headlines as was the attack on the twin towers.

In a way, however, that might not be such a bad thing, because when the focus was on the economy, that led to a rush of Government headline-grabbing initiatives that were not well thought-through, and to the media ceaselessly attempting to pile on the misery, darken the gloom and depress optimism. Every statistical device known to man was used to illustrate that, when compared with the great depression of the 1930s, the black death and so forth, the severity of current circumstances was unrivalled.

I am not trying to pretend that the economy is not in serious difficulties and an unexpectedly bad state, but I drew attention to the media effect on confidence in an early-day motion that I tabled some time ago. I called for that to be studied, because is it not a strange coincidence that some slight signs of recovery—of bottoming out—are arising in a period of relative media neglect? While democratic institutions are taking a hammering, the ailing economy is enjoying something of a media respite.

I make this point because I was receiving a consistent message from my constituents a few months ago. They were saying, "Yes, business is in a fix, and we know that these are difficult, hard and tough times, but we could do without the media larding it on and exaggerating the extent of the depression." The local media do not do that, because they do not want to depress confidence unduly as they recognise that they need advertisers and that those advertisers are local businesses.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman also recognise that when dealing with matters affecting our local economy, which is very important, the most important thing we can do is stand up for manufacturing industry and the people who really matter? We must protect their jobs and interests, and do everything we can to ensure that they can survive in the current difficult circumstances.

Dr. Pugh: I do accept that, but I want to make the point that there is a big difference between how the whole issue has been treated from start to finish by the local media, which in a sense depend on local industry, and by national media, such as the BBC, which do not. I simply point that out. The effect of that may be marginal, but it is nevertheless real. Mark Vitner, senior economist of Wachovia, recently commented on the fragile recovery in business confidence in the US and warned that:

[Dr. Pugh]

"People's expectations were built on such things as newspaper headlines."

Let me turn now to the main subject of our debate: the expectations of business. We are going through tough times, and there is an expectation that Government will help. In good times, good business does not need any help, but most businesses currently do. Genuine attempts to help have been made; the Minister listed some of them. The Government have pressured banks to lend and also to maintain credit, which is very important. They are also trying to create a more benign tax environment; there is some evidence of that in the current Finance Bill. They are spreading business rate payments, too, and increasing advice. More national and European grants are coming forward as well. However, much of the help is rushed, poorly communicated and, at times, ineffectual. It also does not address real and reasonable requests. One of them has already been mentioned: the automatic small business rate relief would not cost the Treasury anything, but it would be enormously beneficial to many local businesses.

Businesses also notice that the help they are being given is incommensurate with the help being given to banks, who were the authors of the general misfortune in the first place, and who still pressure viable businesses rather more than businesses that are likely to default. In other words, they put pressure on businesses that are doing reasonably well and tighten their access to credit, because they know that if they put pressure on businesses that are likely to fail, they themselves will be the losers.

Expectations are not being met, therefore, but then few expectations are being met these days. Few people expected the current economic mess, or the scale of it; few expert economists, global pundits or parliamentarians did so. However, that has not stopped everybody now rushing in to make further predictions with the same confidence as in the past. The best of the predictions do little more than encapsulate current trends. The CBI recently said:

"Although we were deep in recession, the rate of contraction is slowing markedly."

That still augurs that we are going to have increased unemployment, more bankruptcies, more pressure on public finances and a painful clawing back to prosperity.

Fiscal stimulus, or natural retrenchment, may efficiently—or haphazardly—be working as an economic brake, although we recognise that there is a cost to that in terms of the public finances. The big problems, however, are structural, on both an international and a national, British, basis. China and the USA remain trapped in a Faustian pact whereby the productivity of one requires the indebtedness and refinancing of the other. The world financial system requires a remarkable revision, but it does not have the capacity to implement it. The British economy has similar major structural problems. Unlike Sweden and the Czech Republic, we have not learned to protect our manufacturing base. We are also grossly dependent on the footloose service and financial industries. We have not been filling the skills gap either, and there has not been any real attempt to square the circle, so to speak, of matching increased prosperity with diminishing social inequality. We are in a fix, and it is a structural fix. Unless we address these fundamental issues, we will find ourselves in a deeper fix still.

12.47 pm

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I am very pleased to have been called to contribute to this debate because during all the years that I have been a Member of Parliament I have fought for, campaigned for and promoted UK manufacturing—indeed, so much so that Members on both sides of the House have identified me as "Mr. Manufacturing Industry, MP." I have stood up for manufacturing industry under successive Governments. During the 18 years of Conservative government, I formed the Manufacturing and Construction Industries Alliance, which was a partnership between big and small industry, trade unions and all who believed that manufacturing industry is one of the only sources of non-inflationary, sustainable economic growth. I believed that when I first entered the House, and I believe it today, and I also believe that, sadly, successive Governments have often sacrificed manufacturing industry in this country unnecessarily.

In my local area, I am at present deeply concerned that the largest employer, AstraZeneca, a world-renowned pharmaceutical company, is reducing its work force in both my constituency and that of my immediate neighbour and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), by some 1,500 jobs over a three-year period. Those jobs are not disappearing entirely, but they are disappearing from Macclesfield—both at the Hurdsfield plant and the big research development plant at Alderley park—because the company is transferring the jobs to China and Mexico. Why is it doing that? One might say that it is doing that because it is a global company, but it is also doing it because the cost of those jobs is much less in China and Mexico. Over the years the company has also transferred jobs to India. One may say that there is a good reason for it to do so, but the message I am trying to get across to the Government is that they should not increase the cost of employment and of manufacturing industry unnecessarily.

The Government could take many steps at the moment to reduce the costs to manufacturing industry. It will see us come out of this recession, because things produced in this country at a competitive price and to a standard that people want, and delivered as such, are the real wealth creator, which should be encouraged. A smaller company in Poynton in my constituency, Aearo Ltd, owned by 3M, is sadly closing its plant there and transferring the jobs to Poland—again, because of the cost advantages of operating in that country. The Government should take these matters very seriously.

I turn to a matter relating to the Ministry of Defence. On the periphery of my constituency is the BAE Systems facility at Woodford, where the Nimrod aircraft, which is on order for the RAF, is produced. I pay a huge tribute to the trade unions there for the way in which, over recent years, they have worked in complete co-operation with the management in order to produce a good aircraft to the MOD's delivery and specification requirements. Of course there have been problems in the past—about which industry would one say that there have been no difficulties between management and labour in the past?—but at this facility full co-operation has been given.

The MOD has ordered nine Nimrods—the initial order was very much larger and it has subsequently been cut—but it is now looking, under Project Helix, for another three aircraft. I believe that the MOD's R1 mission system upgrade project could utilise the MRA4,

and if it does so, that would extend the work force and the employment at Woodford for a further two years. However, the MOD is looking at the American Rivet Joint, which is a Boeing aircraft that is some 40 years old—these planes are currently lying in the desert, but I am sure that they are being properly maintained—and the thought is to lease three.

I have met the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who has responsibility for procurement, to discuss this matter. I have done so along with representatives of the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, because we want to ensure that our expertise in aerospace continues. We believe that the MOD's R1 mission system upgrade project could be properly fulfilled by the MRA platform and that there is therefore a Nimrod MRA4-based solution to what the MOD requires. The Government can help, so they should retain high-tech engineering jobs in this country, rather than go to another country for purchases that can be fulfilled within our own manufacturing sector.

Having made a plea on behalf of certain industries and companies in my constituency, may I say, as has been said from the Front Benches by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands) and the hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, that despite receiving unprecedented valuable bail-outs from the taxpayer—the Treasury—the banks and other financial institutions are still providing little or inadequate help to hard-pressed businesses and individuals via increased lending?

I have an interest in the construction industry, because I worked in it before I came into this House, and I understand it pretty well. In my view, it is market forces that have constricted the housing market, and not the financial institutions per se. I am not sure whether the Minister agrees with that observation. My view is that falling house prices are mirroring the economy at any one time, and those will correct themselves gradually once the economy has recovered. However, I stress that the lending banks and institutions must do more to help stimulate this country's housing market.

The plight of small to medium-sized businesses is serious. They are the powerhouse of the modern economy, yet the commercial banks are still refusing to lend to struggling businesses. One thing that greatly annoys and frustrates me is that HBOS, which is now part of the Lloyds Banking Group, is refusing to lend to a highly successful, long-standing company in my constituency. Like many companies, it is going through difficult times and has cash flow problems, and HBOS is refusing to honour commitments to it. Having received huge handouts from the taxpayer, the banks, rather than merely representing their own interests, should seek to represent the interests of the economy of this country.

As the Minister will be aware, small businesses often operate on their overdraft facilities, rather than on loans, which are aimed more at development and expansions. The Opposition have made some important proposals, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham dealt with briefly, and called on the Government to act to assist industry in a more positive way than they are doing at the moment. One action could relate to our proposals to cut corporation tax and to cut payroll taxes for small companies; we have also called on the Government to cut national insurance contributions by a penny in the pound for small companies with fewer than five employees. I know that those are small measures, but they are all valuable. On insolvency, small and medium-sized enterprises should be able to apply for a short breathing space during which they would be able to come up with a restructuring plan, rather than go out of business. We want to save as many businesses as we can.

The Government have sought to act on prompt payment, and I give them credit for doing so. As the Minister knows, lots of small businesses provide goods and services to local authorities, with payment normally coming within 30 days. Some local authorities, appreciating the position of small businesses, have implemented a 20-day rule, and I warmly welcome that.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): My hon. Friend will perhaps be excited to learn that Conservative-run Westminster city council has instituted a seven-day repayment rule. On his previous point, although much is said about the idea of trying to introduce a chapter 11-type pause in the insolvency regime, this country's regime is extremely flexible and administration provides that opportunity, instead of companies having to go towards fully-fledged liquidation.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I very much respect the experience of my hon. Friend, who represents Cities of London and Westminster, which, of course, is home to the core of the financial services in this country. I know the very close relationship that he has with those in his constituency, who are the powerhouse of our economy.

As I was saying, some local authorities have implemented a 20-day rule on payments—I am delighted that Westminster city council has implemented a seven-day rule—and bearing in mind that local authorities are dealing with taxpayers' money, I am sure that most taxpayers are very happy with that sort of policy and I hope that it can be followed by many other local authorities. Just a few days can make all the difference in terms of paying bills and staff, and helping businesses to survive, so I urge the Government to approach local authorities to get them to adopt the shortest possible payment period in order to help business at this time.

As I said in a question to the Prime Minister, there are currently 2.73 million manufacturing jobs in the UK, down 160,000 on the year and down from 4.5 million in 1997. Productivity in manufacturing was down 4.1 per cent. in the final quarter of last year on the previous quarter, and that compared to a 1.8 per cent. fall for the whole of the economy. The figures are from the Office for National Statistics. I hope that the Minister will recognise the true value of our manufacturing industries to the stability and future success of the United Kingdom. Will the Government seek to reverse the crippling £16 billion burden of constantly changing regulations and the £7 billion a year new taxes that they have introduced, which are a drag on manufacturing industry, making us less competitive?

The Minister mentioned France and Germany, and I agree that they have had severe problems, mainly—and this does go against my argument—because so much of their economies is manufacturing based. While they do produce manufactured goods, they have no market for them if the country to which they sell them does not

[Sir Nicholas Winterton]

have the money to pay for them. We must not force more of our manufacturers out of business or into relocating abroad. When the economy recovers—as an optimist I believe that it will—we will need manufacturing.

A new report out recently from Policy Exchange reveals how the Prime Minister's second spending spree is set to reach 50 per cent. of GDP—a stark figure indeed—and that is not because of the recession. The report also calls for an emergency Budget and a spending freeze. Government spending is growing far more quickly than in other countries, and faster than in previous recessions. This perceptive and important report finds that the surge in spending is not being driven by the recession. At most, it says, only 6 per cent. of the increased spending is going on public works, and just over a third is due to the rising cost of social security or debt. Instead of "investment", most of the increase is due to a decision to spend more on consumption.

The report also argues that all budgets, except social security, tax credits and debt interest, could be frozen at 2008-09 levels, resulting in savings of £87 billion on the Government's current plans. I have considerable respect for the Minister—I know his background and I used to work in the area that he represents—so I say with some regret that the truth is that history has a habit of repeating itself, and yet again it is a Labour Government who have brought the UK to the brink of bankruptcy. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, the current Prime Minister squandered the growth that he inherited from the last Conservative Government and he now has to fix the problems that his Government have created.

History shows that successive Labour Governments, sadly, always leave the country deeper in debt. The present Government will have doubled the national debt to more than £1 trillion, so that anyone earning more than £20,000 will have to pay more tax. Rampant borrowing and tax rises will make the recession worse and the recovery more difficult, because they undermine the confidence in the future that is crucial to the recovery of economy.

I make a plea to the Government and, perhaps just as strongly, to my own party, which has not always been the best friend to manufacturing, although it does appreciate the role that manufacturing can play, to ensure that the measures that we introduce take fully into account the problems facing the manufacturing industry and the important role that it can play in the recovery of our economy.

1.5 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Bill Clinton had a sign over his desk that said:

"It's the economy, stupid".

It was there to remind him that although people claimed that the electorate were interested in other matters, it was the economy that mattered most. It is the economy that matters most to the people in my constituency and, I suspect, in most other constituencies. Even the anger that has been experienced over allowances, and before that over bonuses for bankers, is fuelled by people's fear and uncertainty about their own economic prospects, and we should not forget that.

The sad truth is that although the economy is the most important issue for this country and our constituents, the Government have chosen to have a one and a half hour debate on it on a day when the local and European elections are distracting our attention. Until a few moments ago, the Government had not even been able to persuade a single one of their Back Benchers to support their position here. That is an astonishing rejection by the Government and their supporters of the importance of the economy.

The title of the debate also refers to "supporting business". The implication is that direct intervention by the Government can solve the problems of business. At the moment, the principal problem in this country and the rest of the world is a shortage of demand for all the resources and people available to produce goods and services. As long as the principal problem is that shortage of demand, merely switching an element of that demand through the tax system to be spent elsewhere will not alleviate the problem. Money can be spent on the automobile industry, but it will be at the expense of money spent elsewhere. That may receive support from people in the auto industry, but it destroys jobs elsewhere. It is only measures to restore the aggregate demand in the economy to employ all the resources available that will ultimately support industry.

We should be considering measures that will restore the growth of demand and thus the growth of economic output and employment. In my view, the key to that is money. It may be an old-fashioned view, but money is very important. If people have money in their pockets, they will be inclined to spend it. If they do not have money, they will not be able to spend it. If they have inadequate supplies of money, they will save and scrimp to try to build up their money balances. If one person saves money, less money goes to other people, and the total output of the economy is not altered.

I think that the Government had the right intention with quantitative easing. We need measures to boost the supply of money in the economy. People may think that that is an unusual thing for me to say. I am a longstanding monetarist, and many of my monetarist friends are suspicious about printing money, because it can be a cause of inflation—especially if too much is printed. However, if there is an insufficiency of money—the collapse of the banking system threatened to destroy money—more money must be created. That is why it was essential for the Government to prop up the banking system. If banks collapse they destroy money in the economy. In a developed economy, money normally comes from banks increasing their lending. That is what creates additional money.

If I were to lend my distinguished hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) £100, I would be £100 worse off, he would be £100 better off and there would be no increase in the money supply. If he, however, were to go to the bank and say, "Can I increase my overdraft by £100?," that would create £100. There would be £100 extra in the economy—and when he spent it, as I am sure he would in due course, that money would circulate through the economy. Banks create money, but when banks are retrenching on their lending they destroy money. They call in loans and do not replace them, and there is less money in the economy. That is why it was necessary and right for the Government to do something like quantitative easing to

ensure that enough money was circulating in the economy. It takes a little time for that to happen, but I think that it will happen. It might be part of the reason why we are seeing at least a slow-down in the recession and even some signs that it is bottoming out, even if we are not yet seeing a resumption of growth.

Mr. Mark Field: My right hon. Friend rightly points out some of the concerns about the level of quantitative easing. Given the amount of money that has been printed by the Government, much of which to date is being hoarded by the banks, there is a potential inflationary problem. He says "provided that too much money is not printed." How on earth can we possibly judge when that point is reached—when too much has been printed, or, indeed, is about to be unleashed into the economy at large?

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend's question could be rephrased, "How are we to know when too little money has been printed, when too little money is available or when too much money has been destroyed by the banks' retrenching?" We have to make a judgment. The Bank of England spelled out what it thinks is necessary and it will do it in a series of tranches. It is not proposing a Zimbabwean type of inflation, but an increase of a few percentage points in the supply of money. In general, an economy needs to see the money supply growing by a few percentage points more than the real growth that one hopes to achieve. We need to get back to that, and as long as the Bank does not overdo it, that is sensible.

By contrast, reliance on a fiscal stimulus seems likely to be less effective, and there is less scope for it in the British economy than might be desirable. If we started from a position whereby the Government had a very low deficit, or a surplus, it would be worth a try. It would be worth the Government's saying, "Let's give a fiscal stimulus by borrowing to spend." However, when a Government start with a huge deficit, any further increase in that deficit is likely to destroy confidence, and as a result, have a negative rather than a positive effect on the total level of demand in the economy.

That is not just a theoretical point. The European Central Bank and economists from the European Commission have both separately carried out analyses of all the studies that have been published of attempts to use fiscal stimulus, in Europe and elsewhere, to stimulate the economy in the post-war period. They both show that on a majority of occasions when Governments have attempted to use the Keynesian weapons of borrowing to boost demand, it has had the opposite effect to what simple-minded Keynesians might have predicted. On half the occasions when Governments have boosted borrowing, that has led to deflation. On other occasions when they have reduced borrowing, even in a recession, it has led to a resumption of growth.

That is not something that should be too unfamiliar to us in this country. We have had three major recessions since the late '70s. In 1976, the Labour Government faced a terrible recession with a huge and burgeoning deficit. The Keynesians among them said, "Let's add to it. Let's borrow even more, spend even more and try to get out of this recession." Unfortunately, there was a run on the pound and they had to call in the International Monetary Fund—the only time the IMF has ever been called in to a developed economy—and the IMF said, "Stuff that for a lark. Forget about Keynes. Just get your books balanced again, raise your taxes, reduce your spending and that will restore confidence and get things going." And it worked. I went to a seminar recently at which someone who was one of the Government's chief economic advisers at the time said that they were astonished at how rapidly it worked, and how rapidly the economy started recovering thereafter.

In 1980-81 the economy appeared to be in freefall, with a decline in output. At the same time, there was a terrible deficit. The then Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, had the courage to say, "We've got to get the public finances back into order if we are to restore confidence and resume growth." Then 364 economists, led by the man who taught me monetary economics—or tried to, as I am happy to say that I did not imbibe all his views—published an open letter to the Chancellor saying that there was no reason in theory or in past experience to believe that if he persisted with his policy it could lead to anything other than an intensification of the recession. If we plot what happened, we can see that the economy was in freefall until 13 March, the day that they published that letter. From then onwards, a V-shaped recovery began. They were completely factually wrong. We know from experience that it can sometimes be right to get a grip on the public finances. That restores confidence and leads to a resumption of growth. The same applied in 1992.

That, of course, is why the Government, despite all their rhetoric and talk about an additional fiscal stimulus, have not introduced an additional fiscal stimulus on top of what is already happening through the automatic stabilisers. They are right not to take that risk. On the other hand the German Government, which is in a much better position, ought to be increasing spending, borrowing and trying to get their economy going. Other economies that are in that happy position should do likewise.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): As a simple-minded Keynesian speaking to a simple-minded monetarist, may I say that if the right hon. Gentleman looks at the pattern of fiscal support for the economy across Europe and the G8, he will see that, astonishingly, the support provided by the different Governments is very similar? The only variance is whether it takes place through automatic stabilisers or a separate fiscal stimulus. The pattern of support is very similar, and that blows a hole in much of his argument.

Mr. Lilley: My argument was based on the fact of what has happened in the past rather than projections of what might be happening now. We shall see. It might provide an interesting test case if we come back in three or four years' time and argue it out. The hon. Lady describes herself as a simple-minded Keynesian and me as a simple-minded monetarist, but if we are both simple-minded enough to say that we should look at the evidence, we will see that the evidence is clear. The evidence is not just what I have put forward; the evidence has been put forward by the European Central Bank in its study of studies and the European Commission in its study of studies, and the conclusion they have come to is that on a lot of occasions the Keynesian stimulus does not work and has a contrary effect.

[Mr. Lilley]

I am relatively optimistic that a recovery might soon be under way, because we will see the normal inventory cycle reverse. When final demand for goods falls, as it fell after the Lehman effect with the collapse in confidence across the world, that is amplified as companies do not merely reduce their demand by the 10 per cent. fall-off in final demand but reduce their inventories, too. Back down the supply chain, the 10 per cent. decline in demand might become a 20 per cent. decline and then a 50 per cent. decline in demand for components. We have seen that across the world, and it is partly why the great manufacturing economies, despite the great strengths that my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) pointed out, suffer a particularly sharp downturn during that inventory cycle. It merely has to stop, in a sense, for it to reverse. When people stop reducing their inventories, that feeds back through the chain and produces a sharp rise in output, even if it does not go back to the level it was at before the crisis began. We may see that inventory cycle go through its normal process.

My worry is more for the longer term. Again, I just look at the evidence. What evidence have we for what happens when a modern developed economy experiences a banking crisis and a subsequent recession? The only such experience that we have is that of Japan. It did many of the things that we have done, but in a slightly different order, and some people say that it did not do them fast enough. It managed to avoid the worst of a recession, but it had 10 years of sluggish growth. My fear is that if we do not get rid of the overhang of both public and private debt as speedily as possible we, too, may first enjoy something of a recovery but then have quite a sustained period of sluggish growth.

That is why it is absolutely vital that the Government realise the supreme importance of getting a grip on the nation's finances. We face the most enormous deficit; it is unbelievably large. Effectively, the Government are saying, "We will borrow to finance the entire military, education and law and order budgets, and much of the health budget, too." If we closed down all the Departments concerned, it would just about eliminate the deficit, but I certainly hope that the Government will not close them down. We have to look for savings wherever and whenever we can find them.

I can tell the Economic Secretary to the Treasury that I have been responsible for the biggest-spending Department in Government, and I have seen the problems and pressures of trying to control public expenditure from within the Treasury. The single most important thing, and the first thing, that one must learn to do is to say no. Until we can stop inventing new ways of spending money, we will not get a grip on the total imbalance between our propensity to spend and our ability to raise revenue through taxation. The Government keep adding to the burdens. I get summoned, as Members do, to sit on little Delegated Legislation Committees. There was one the other day that proposed spending an extra £120 million on some benefit for expectant mothers. Even the Liberals, I am happy to say, thought that the measure was complete rubbish and voted against it, as did I. Nobody on the Committee thought that the benefit would do any good to anybody. I am generally in favour of feeding expectant mothers every kind of nutrient that they could need, but there was no support for the measure, and it was badly timed and badly focused. It was a pure gimmick—but it will cost £120 million. The deficit is made up of thousands of £120 millions, and we have to get a grip on them and stop giving the money away.

Ms Keeble: There is clear medical evidence that if we support women during pregnancy, particularly with food, for which they need money, the outcome for babies is improved. In particular, doing so tackles the problem of low-birthweight babies, which is a problem in some of our inner cities. That measure is a practical way of tackling that problem.

Mr. Lilley *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman responds, may I say that we are rapidly running out of time, and there are more hon. Members who want to speak? Perhaps he would bear that in mind.

Mr. Lilley: I apologise for going on for so long. It was a mistake for me to bring up a detailed issue. There are clearly arguments in favour of the measure concerned, but at a time of national emergency we ought to be saying, "Not now." We have done without it for the past 50 years; we can do without it for the next five years. Until the Government learn to say, "Not now. No new projects or programmes. Let's get a grip on the ones that we have," we will not avoid the prospect of 10 years of sluggish growth.

1.23 pm

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Despite the fact that Scarborough was recently voted the most enterprising town in Britain, and went on to the finals in Prague, where it was voted the most enterprising town in Europe, we have not managed to buck the trend of this Labour recession. Between April 2008 and April 2009, unemployment has gone up by 68.7 per cent.; that is 1,000 more people out of work.

The biggest shock to our local economy was the closure of the two Greaves printing works. On 9 April 2008, almost 200 jobs were lost at the gravure print works, and on 30 January 2009, 200 jobs were lost at the finishing works. On the day of the European elections, people ask, "What are the benefits of Europe?" and some might answer, "Structural funding has gone into the former coalfield areas and into the areas where heavy industry is in decline," but ironically it is precisely because Polestar printing got a £6-million grant from the European Commission under objective 1 funding for its new print works in Sheffield that the print works in Scarborough has had to close. The law of unintended consequences has come into action.

The building and construction market is dire. The second-home market for premium flats on the seafront is holding up reasonably well, possibly because many people cannot see the point of keeping their savings in the building society given the low interest rates being offered, and because of the worry that there may be inflation coming down the road as a result of quantitative easing. However, the market for residential property,

and certainly new-build property, is very poor indeed. Given that people previously got 95 or even 100 per cent. mortgages, I suppose that now that they are being told that they need a 10 or 20 per cent. deposit, it is not surprising that there will be a time lag before people in rented accommodation come into the market, if indeed they can save that money.

The automotive industry is doing better in Scarborough than in other parts of the country, mainly because the Plaxton bus factory and the Bluebird coach factory are selling to local authorities and to the public sector. Of course, the McCain chip factory makes the ultimate counter-cyclical product; there is nothing like a bit of comfort food during a recession.

Of course, the lifeblood of Scarborough and Whitby is the tourism industry, and the weak pound is helping there, as people are choosing not to go abroad. As a result of the uncertainty, people are leaving it later and later before they make their booking. In fact, last year, I asked an hotelier in Whitby on a Thursday what the bookings were like for the weekend, and he said, "It's too early to say." People wait for the weather forecast on Thursday night, or even on Friday, before they go online and book their rooms. Fortunately, weather forecasts are more accurate than some of the Chancellor's forecasts in the Budget. For example, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury mentioned the fact that the economy had contracted by 1.9 per cent. That was announced by the Office for National Statistics only two days after the Chancellor had forecast a 1.6 per cent. contraction in the economy. In fact, Treasury forecasts are so consistently wrong that they are in the same league as Michael Fish was when he told us not to worry about that hurricane.

I should like to flag up a couple of issues that affect the tourist industry, and they give another example of the law of unintended consequences. The first point is about the threshold for VAT registration. We are trying to make Scarborough and Whitby a 12-month-a-year resort, but all too often, when it gets to February or March and the owners of small guest houses look at their turnover for the year, they see that they are on the point of breaching the £68,000 VAT threshold. It makes more sense for them to close down their guest house and go to Tenerife for a few weeks than to stay open. It is a real problem. If they go over the threshold, they have to pay VAT on all the money that they have taken since the previous April. I do not know whether Ministers are thinking about how that could be addressed. Perhaps we will have to leave it to the next Government to try to come up with a solution to that problem.

On holiday lets, bookings are up, but I am concerned about changes in the Budget that affect the holiday let market. From April 2010, income from holiday lets will no longer be classified as earned income; it will instead be classified as unearned income. One consequence is that income from that side of the business cannot be offset against income other than other property income. That affects many small farms that have invested in their farm buildings, and converted them into holiday lets. Those farms now find that the two businesses cannot be offset against each other. Also, income from such holiday lets now does not qualify as "relevant earnings" for pension fund contributions. Such holiday cottages can no longer be considered a business asset, and that will have far-reaching implications for capital gains tax planning. All sorts of reliefs that are available for business assets, such as roll-over, hold-over and entrepreneur's relief, will no longer be available.

We know why the Government did that; it was because many people had second homes on the coast, or even abroad, and it was seen as unfair that they could use the cost of running those holiday homes, assuming that they let them for 140 days, against their income from their ordinary jobs, but the case of farm cottages is entirely different. They are a diversification of a business. Farmers do not stay in their holiday cottages, but the cottages are usually in the farmyard. They are an integral part of the steading. In many cases the planning permission given by the local authority or the national park authority means that those holiday cottages cannot be sold off separately from the unit. In fact, in some cases, land cannot be sold off separately from that unit. I hope that the Minister will look at that problem and make sure that we can do something to try to help the hard-pressed tourist industry in my constituency.

1.30 pm

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) and, indeed, with my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Hands) on the Front Bench, when they referred to the fantasy figures that undermined much of the recent Budget. The very idea that there might be 3.5 per cent. growth during the year after next provided the Government with a very convenient alibi with which to avoid making some of the tough decisions that they must make on public expenditure. Those decisions have effectively now been delayed until after the next general election.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham rightly recalled the emergence of the International Monetary Fund, as, indeed, did my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). We went to the IMF some 33 years ago, and the big worry in many people's minds is that we will have to return to it. I suspect that, if we do go down that path, the Government will do all they can to avoid it happening on their watch.

As the Member for the City of London, I believe that in the months ahead several pressing issues will emerge in our financial heartlands. As the Minister knows, two of the big four domestic banks are now all but fully nationalised. One of those, Lloyds Banking Group, contains what might euphemistically be called "assets" from HBOS, which engaged in a series of balance-sheet boosting debt-for-equity deals during the boom years in the middle of this decade. As a consequence, Lloyds Banking Group has large holdings in a swathe of leading UK companies. Doubtless, many such household names will require refinancing as the downturn proceeds, and their financial rescue will come from the taxpayers' coffers, for obvious reasons. In short, before long, considerably large parts of mainstream corporate UK could end up being effectively nationalised.

We need to use some much smarter intelligence to nip regulatory problems in the bud. An enhanced role for the Bank of England is very much a part of my party's policy, but that development will have to be accompanied by the appointment of some high-calibre, trusted and respected professionals to the Bank's top roles. That in

[Mr. Mark Field]

turn should be augmented by the emergence of prosecutors with US-style status to replace what I am afraid is an increasingly discredited Serious Fraud Office. Nothing less will restore the confidence of market professionals and the public at large.

I fear that the banking bail-outs will turn out to be an expensive failure. Indeed, that has already been proved to a large extent, and I do not entirely agree with the earlier comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden. The lesson that we must learn is that any institution that is deemed too big to be allowed to fail will forever be prey to reckless risk-taking. If banks cannot fail, they cannot effectively be regulated, because regulation requires the eradication, not reward, of recklessness.

I appreciate that, in the current economic situation, in relation not so much to banks, but to depositors, it is difficult for us simply to stand aside. However, the operation of capitalism requires corporate failure. It is not "market failure", as it has been articulated by many in the governing circles; it is a sign that capitalism is working properly and efficiently. The message that banks will not be allowed to fail serves only to make their effective regulation all but impossible, because regulation creates tremendous barriers to entry and therefore advantages larger corporations over smaller start-ups. The wisest policy option is to create smaller, more competitive financial institutions, and I fear that nationalisation, of which we may see more, leads us in precisely the wrong policy direction. The best form of regulation must always be open competition, and public ownership is anathema to that policy goal.

Dr. Pugh: How do the Government create smaller financial institutions?

Mr. Field: I shall come on to that point in a moment. One of the great mistakes that the US made a decade ago was to break down the Glass-Steagall distinction between investment and depositor banks. We must protect depositors' interests, but the core problem with the nationalisation of our banks is that bondholders' interests are now also preserved—at the expense of taxpayers, both present and future.

My right hon. Friend for Hitchin and Harpenden touched on quantitative easing. I suspect that the current consensus that favours it will find less favour as this year wears on. With little evidence that the velocity of money within the economy is any less sluggish as the real recession takes hold, printing money in vast quantities increasingly seems like a last throw of the governmental dice when relatively little else has succeeded. My right hon. Friend is quite right that inflation is clearly not an imminent problem, but the unprecedented pumping of money into the system is certain to be inflationary as time goes on. History suggests that an unsustainable mini-boom may well be on the cards by the first half of next year, but I fear that stagflation—a toxic mix of inflation, rapidly rising unemployment and low growth or diminished competitiveness—will follow. Indeed, the commodities and futures markets already factor it in when pricing for the early years of the next decade. I suspect that the Government will not have seen the last of their recent problems with trying to sell gilts, either. In the City, there is a lot of evidence that many banks now hold vast sums of cash and are ready to reinvest in the market, courtesy of the Bank of England's policy of promoting liquidity.

I accept that now that we live in a globalised economy, this crisis is certainly different in magnitude from any that we have ever seen. One of the grand old names of British banking, Barings, collapsed owing what seems like a minuscule amount, £780 million, only 14 years ago. Today, the Royal Bank of Scotland survives courtesy only of a £26 billion bail-out. However, we can learn lessons from the past. As I mentioned earlier, we need to restore the distinction between retail and investment banking which, in the US at least, existed for more than six decades until the Clinton Administration repealed the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999. At that juncture, it was regarded as outdated 1930's throwback legislation, but its purpose was to protect the ordinary depositor from high-risk, if innovative, banking practices. That protection now seems mighty apposite.

How then do we deal with the toxic assets that banks still hold and find so difficult to quantify? Curiously enough, the UK has a pretty good template close at hand. The near collapse of Lloyd's of London in the insurance market, which has developed great strength in recent years, was avoided almost two decades ago by the creation of the Government-backed Equitas fund. That experience should be the starting point for the consideration of any further large-scale Government-backed rescue expenditure. In fairness to the Government, they have begun down such a path, but we should be fearful of the likely overall cost to the taxpayer.

The nagging sense of insecurity that the spoils of globalisation are being spread inequitably will continue to grow among the majority of the UK work force, and it has the makings of serious social unrest. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield, because the hollowing-out of large swathes of "traditional" UK industry, particularly manufacturing, as employment has been exported to low-cost China and India, has not been accompanied by higher, middle-class and middle-income professional earnings, at least for those outside the gilded world of financial and associated services.

During the past decade, the mirage of higher living standards was maintained only by the credit-fuelled residential property market. The sharp correction of that market has exposed the reality that, in recent times, international free-trade has done little to enrich, personally, at least, the majority of our fellow countrymen. It is dawning on many middle-income folk that the losers from the free movement of labour and capital are not simply the unskilled who are forced to compete with ever large numbers of immigrant workers; it is increasingly apparent that the generation that is about to join the work force will probably be less well off than their parents, not least because they will have to foot the bill for the economic unravelling that became so apparent last September. That phenomenon is almost unimaginable outside times of war and a shocking indictment for today's generation of politicians.

On the political difficulties ahead, there is little doubt that, whichever political party wins the next election, tough and unpalatable decisions will have to be made on public spending. Even if the Government's own—almost certainly wildly optimistic—figures on public spending come to pass, during 2009 they will raise only £3 for every £4 that they spend.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden that we must come to terms in double-quick time with the fact that, arguably, entire areas of central and local government activity should no longer qualify for public funding. The overall state of the public finances suggests the necessity for further scrutiny, even in areas such as education, health and defence, which in more economically clement times my party pledged to ring-fence. The issue of defence, of course, will be discussed in the forthcoming debate. Although there has been a marked improvement in school and hospital infrastructure in the past decade, much of it has been financed, off balance sheet, by the private finance initiative. It will need to be paid for in the years to come.

I appreciate that the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), having arrived slightly late, wants to say a few words, so I shall bring my comments to an end. In the past decade or so, we have lived to a large extent in the best of economic times; now, however, we have a big price to pay—and a much tougher era awaits.

1.40 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) for cutting short what was obviously a much longer speech; we saw him paging through it at the end.

I should like to pick up a few points and make a few remarks to the Government on how to move forward. Despite the need for caution and care, and despite the caveats and risks involved in what the Government are doing, the Government's approach to dealing with the crisis is absolutely right and it has already spared a great many of my constituents a great deal of hardship. Without the Government's strategy, I am sure that many more of them would have lost their homes, or been at risk of that happening, and that many more would have found that that they did not have jobs either. Despite the difficulty of managing such a profound recession, I think that we will see the benefits of the Government's approach.

It would be extremely nice to be able to discuss the comments made by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) and the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster, but there is no time for that. I will, however, pick up on a couple of points. First, it is completely wrong to say that the quantitative easing is anything like the printing of money in Zimbabwe. The asset purchase facility, coming on top of the asset protection scheme, has been well designed to deal with the toxic assets and get money flowing in the private sector. It has been absolutely the right approach.

If the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden is to lend money to the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster, I hope that he will conduct an honest assessment of the risks involved with that character, that he does due diligence and that he gets some proper security, because what caused the banking crisis were improper risk management, lack of due diligence and lack of proper security for the assets.

The Minister is not going to respond, but I will make three points to him. First, will he please make sure that there is a report on the results of bank lending to business? Like other colleagues, I think that the situation has not been as we would like and everybody wants such a report. Secondly, will he also make sure that his Department does real work with the Department for Communities and Local Government so that public spending on housing goes to local private contractors and so that local councils can manage things properly and support their local industries? Thirdly, will he make sure that the Government take into account the impact of their spending and efficiency reviews on the wider economy, so that—

1.44 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 24A).

Defence in the World

1.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Hutton): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of defence in the world.

I am delighted to open this afternoon's debate on defence in the world. Today more than 17,000 of our armed forces personnel are deployed around the globe, protecting our national interests and working with our international partners in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, the south Atlantic, Gibraltar, Nepal, Canada, Belize, Kenya and Cyprus. I know that all Members of the House will wish to join me once again in paying tribute to the contribution that each and every member of our armed forces makes to build a safer world on our behalf, and in acknowledging the sacrifices that they all make in doing so. They are truly outstanding individuals, and the whole country can be rightly proud of their professionalism and dedication to duty.

It is right that, sadly, I should begin by offering my deepest condolences to the family and friends of Cyrus Thatcher, of 2nd Battalion the Rifles, who was killed on active service in Afghanistan this week. We mourn his loss and extend our deepest sympathy to his family.

In April, I had the honour of attending the ceremony to mark the successful completion of British combat missions in Basra. It was, for me and many others, a deeply moving occasion. Our armed forces have achieved a huge amount in the past six years, including a transformed security situation in Basra and an increasingly capable Iraqi police force and army. Furthermore, they have helped to create a secure environment in which Iraq's new democracy can grow. After years of oppression by Saddam Hussein, southern Iraq now has the opportunity to fulfil its very considerable economic potential.

The task was not achieved without sacrifice. The House will, I know, also join me today in paying tribute to the 179 British armed forces personnel who lost their lives in Iraq. We and the Iraqi people owe them a debt that we can never repay, and that is why we must honour their memory and care for their families. I am in no doubt at all that we have left Iraq a better place, and that we have made a real difference to the lives of its citizens. According to General Odierno, the commander of coalition forces in Iraq, what the British armed forces have achieved in Basra and elsewhere in Iraq is "nothing short of brilliant".

Operation Telic was not the beginning of our involvement in Iraq; this week, the Royal Air Force concluded almost 19 years of operations in the skies above the country. Whether it was strike missions during the wars in 1991 and 2003 and the protection of the Shi'a of the south and the Kurds of the north from the malevolence and violence of Saddam's regime, or the provision of support to ground forces and the playing of a vital logistics role over the past six years, the Royal Air Force has a proud record, in the finest traditions of that service.

The combat mission in Basra was not the beginning of the UK's role in Iraq, and nor does its conclusion mark its end. As part of a broadly based relationship between the UK and Iraq, we are now making the transition to a different, but close, bilateral defence relationship. As the Prime Minister told the House in December, our future military role will focus on continuing protection of Iraq's oil platforms in the northern Gulf, together with training of the Iraqi navy and marines, and officers of the Iraqi armed forces more broadly. We are preparing to lead an officer training initiative as part of the NATO training mission in Iraq, but that, of course, will be subject to NATO reaching its own agreement with the Government of Iraq.

In the meantime, as our current permissions for operational and training activities expired on 31 May, we have paused in our support to the Iraqi military in Iraq, pending ratification of the new agreement. However, our programme of training for Iraqi service personnel on military courses in the UK continues and is expanding. I very much welcome the Iraqi Council of Ministers' endorsement on Tuesday of a draft UK-Iraq training and maritime support agreement. Once that has been signed, which I hope will happen shortly, I will place a copy of it in the Library of the House in parallel with its presentation to the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

As our relationship with Iraq enters a new phase, the main focus of operations will naturally shift to Afghanistan. As the Prime Minister has said, Afghanistan and Pakistan are of critical strategic importance to the United Kingdom and the international community as a whole. In December 2007, we set out a comprehensive approach to tackling the insurgency in Afghanistan. Building on that, in April this year the Government published our approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The 9/11 attacks demonstrated overwhelmingly the international terrorist threat posed from Afghanistan. We must never forget that that country was allowed to become a base for al-Qaeda to plan terrorist operations across the world.

Barry Gardiner (Brent, North) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the country of India, perhaps more than any other, has experienced exactly those kinds of terrorist attacks from that base in Afghanistan and, indeed, in parts of Pakistan? Does he welcome the fact that a new and very stable Indian Government have just been elected, and will he tell us of any prospective talks with his counterpart in the Indian Government to ensure that the bulwark of stability in the region that is democratic India can continue to help in what is going on, which is causing so many problems across the world?

Mr. Hutton: I certainly do talk to the Indian Defence Minister, and I was able to do so particularly in the aftermath of the Mumbai terrorist atrocity. India is the most remarkable and vibrant democracy in the world. In my view, democracy is the best defence against extremism. However, as we know—our own history tells us this—democracies need to be defended. The atrocities against the Indian people—the Indian democracy—require a robust response from the Pakistan authorities, because there is no doubt whatsoever that those terrorist missions were launched with support and logistics from Pakistan. That has to be addressed. There can be no hiding place for those terrorists in Pakistan. We therefore welcome the steps that the Pakistani Government have taken to bring them to justice, but more has to be done for that crime to be addressed. Until that action is taken, tensions will remain unnecessarily

high in the region. There is no doubt at all, in any part of the House, about our respect for the Indian democracy and our best wishes for the newly elected Indian Government.

We have certainly learned our lesson from the failure in allowing Afghanistan to fall into the clutches of the violent extremists and ideological terrorists. We remain in Afghanistan to prevent it from again becoming an ungoverned space from which terrorism can be launched against ourselves or our allies. So our mission in Afghanistan is designed first and foremost to protect our own national security.

The United Kingdom has contributed military forces in Afghanistan since 2001, and since 2006 we have played a key role in the south of the country, in the Taliban heartland. In Helmand, our forces perform extraordinary acts of bravery and courage every day as they confront the terrorists and help to protect the local population from the fear and reality of violence. They are training the army and the police to ensure that the Afghans themselves can develop a position of strength to withstand and ultimately overcome the terrorists who threaten their country from within, and to create a stable security environment in which the Afghan Government can build institutions and enable development to take place. Across Helmand province, town by town, we have seen that happen. District centres have been taken from the insurgents and are now thriving, with markets bustling and schools and clinics opening.

Crucial to this success has been the development of the Afghan national army. The international community must help Afghanistan to build a capable and competent force that can take the lead on security operations. The long-term future of Afghanistan depends on its ability to manage its own affairs. In the three years that the UK has been mentoring the Afghan national army in Helmand, it has developed into one of the most battle-hardened and competent brigades in Afghanistan, with three of the four infantry kandaks and the brigade headquarters now capable of conducting operations with minimal support from the international security assistance force—ISAF.

These achievements are producing tangible results. Only last December, Afghan security forces, supported by British, Danish and Estonian troops, successfully cleared insurgents from the town of Nad-e Ali. Since that operation, the provincial governor, Governor Mangal, who is doing an excellent job, has held the first shura there for five years; voter registration has successfully taken place; and bazaars in urban areas are open for business again, and thriving. But the most important thing is that since the initial operation, security in Nad-e Ali has been maintained by the Afghans themselves. Our military successes in Helmand have allowed the UK, working with the Afghans through our civil military mission in Helmand, to deliver support to the provincial government and help it to deliver basic services and be more accountable to the people.

Rightly and properly, the Afghan people want and deserve the right to decide the future of their own country. We are committed to helping them to hold credible elections that represent the will of the people and demonstrate that the Afghan Government have the authority to rule. Security over the election period will be critical. That is why last month my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced an increase in troops from 8,300 to 9,000 until the autumn. However, the Afghan national security forces will lead on securing the elections; our role is to provide effective support to them. We are working closely with the Afghan national security forces, the Afghan independent electoral commission, ISAF and others to prepare for these elections. Voter registration, which started in October last year, has now been completed across the whole country. More than 4 million new names have been added to the existing voter registry. The fact that the insurgents have failed to disrupt the process so far is a credit to all involved, particularly the Afghan national security forces.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): In the emphasis that the British and the Americans are placing on persuading the Afghan people to accept the Afghan constitution, are we not still in danger of imposing too much of a western style of government on to a country to which that is completely alien? Should we not be doing more to work for reconciliation towards more traditional forms of Afghan government in order that we alienate less the tribal institutional structures, particularly in the provinces?

Mr. Hutton: The constitution of Afghanistan is a matter for the Afghan people. The current constitution has been supported in a number of important elections since it was adopted. There is no conflict between supporting the Afghan constitution and supporting the reconciliation process. I think that we are all in favour of seeing greater reconciliation, and there are different avenues and paths through which that can be conducted. Essentially, my view is pragmatic, not ideological. It cannot be said of the Afghan constitution—the Afghan system of government—that it is a thing of perfect democratic beauty; it would be naive and probably premature to imagine that it ever could be. However, the fundamentals of the constitution are decent and enduring. The right of free people to decide their own Government and to choose the people who govern over them is the fundamental characteristic of the Afghan constitution, and that is worth defending.

Mr. Jenkin: The problem is that the Bonn constitution was constructed perhaps rather artificially at a time when a large part of the Taliban community of Afghanistan was not involved. The whole Karzai Administration have little support among the Pashtun majority, who were excluded from that constitutional settlement. Do not we need to allow the Afghan people more collectively to reframe a constitution that is more in line with their own history and tradition?

Mr. Hutton: The Afghan people have those freedoms. Ultimately, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Barry Gardiner) as regards India, those freedoms are the best defence against the extremism of the violent insurgents who seek to replace the democracy of Afghanistan—imperfect though it might be, as I would concede—with an altogether different regime with no respect for human rights, freedom of conscience and freedom of speech. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and I would join forces in ensuring that that did not come about. These are ultimately matters for the Afghan people, who are now, fortunately, free to address those concerns themselves.

[Mr. Hutton]

The instability of Pakistan is also of increasing concern—it is very real and obvious. The threat to Pakistan posed by militancy and terrorism is very severe. Last year alone, internal violence killed 2,000 people in Pakistan. We strongly welcome the current action being taken by the Pakistani Government to address the terrorist problem within their borders, where most violent extremist organisations in Pakistan, including al-Qaeda, operate. Effective security co-operation on both sides of the Durand line is therefore essential for success. UK and ISAF forces would benefit directly from improved border controls that constrained the flow of insurgents in and out of Afghanistan.

However, we must remember that Pakistan is rightly a proud and sovereign nation. It is Pakistan's responsibility to act against the threat of extremism and when it does, we will continue to offer our assistance.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Foreign Secretary about the potential for the new Indian Government to help the situation in Pakistan by reducing tensions along the border?

Mr. Hutton: I have regular discussions with my right hon. Friend about that, and I am happy to brief the hon. Gentleman about our current thinking. There are opportunities for tensions to be eased, but the essential condition for that will be action against the Lashkar-e-Taiba militants in Pakistan who have still not been brought to justice. I am afraid to say that at the moment, there is little evidence that they will be any time soon. That would be a significant step for Pakistan to take, and we would strongly support and encourage it to do so.

We should maintain our constructive dialogue with Pakistan's military and help them to combat the insurgency more effectively. We are also supporting financially the efforts of the Pakistan Government to improve the education of its population in the federally administered tribal areas, which is fundamental to removing the insurgents' ability to exploit local people for unbelievably horrific ends such as suicide bombings.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): I am very pleased to hear what the Secretary of State is saying about helping education in Pakistan. One thing that I have bemoaned in this country is that we spend only something like 2 per cent. of our gross domestic product on defence, but in Pakistan they spend only 2 per cent. of theirs on education. The Pakistanis need to consider that carefully, because it is extremely important.

Mr. Hutton: I strongly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is ultimately for the Pakistan Government to address their internal priorities and how they wish to spend their resources, but there is undoubtedly a strong view that education needs to be addressed now. If it is not addressed in a co-ordinated and serious way, that will simply allow extremist organisations to take over responsibility for educating young Pakistani boys and girls. I am afraid that that will lead to only one consequence.

Barry Gardiner: My right hon. Friend is being most indulgent in giving way to Members of all parties. Has he had any discussions with the Pakistani Government about the release of Hafiz Sayeed, who was the chief accused of the Mumbai bombings and was in captivity in Pakistan? Does that not betoken a reluctance on the part of the Pakistan Government to pursue these measures with the vigour that we all wish to see?

Mr. Hutton: I have not had any discussion with my opposite number in Pakistan about that, because those are primarily matters for my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to pursue through the normal diplomatic channels. I am sure that if there were a representative of the Pakistan Government here today, he or she would say that the release was a decision of an independent judicial authority, and that it was the actions of the Pakistan Government that led to that individual's initial detention because of the allegations that he was associated with the crimes committed in Mumbai. Whatever the legal or constitutional position, there is no doubt that a very serious crime took place. Nor is there any doubt in our mind that Lashkar-e-Taiba, acting in Pakistan, was directly responsible for that crime, and action must be taken.

Although current operations inevitably shape our defence posture today, I wish to concentrate my remaining remarks on how we can prepare ourselves for the future. We all agree that the world is changing rapidly around us and that we must be both well prepared for changes and willing and able to adapt to them. The UK has an active international role and presence, and we must take into account the global trends that will shape our future. Two trends stand out to me.

First, ours is now clearly a more connected world. Increased globalisation means increased interdependency, and we must be open to that. Our linkages to the world are essential to the UK's prosperity and success, and this is no time for protectionism. But global freedoms and connections clearly create vulnerabilities—take, for example, the global economic crisis, the shared problems of insurgency, terrorism, violent extremism and the drug trade in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the emerging threats of piracy and cyber attack.

Secondly, it is pretty clear now that we are seeing a shift in the balance of power globally. More states have a voice, through greater economic power or strategic importance. Decision making in the world will therefore be more complex and we will need more innovative approaches if we are to achieve peace and prosperity. We talk more today of the G20 than we do of the G7 or G8. China, Brazil and India all have increasing global influence to match their rapidly expanding economies.

So what are the new security challenges that we face in this age of risk and uncertainty? We certainly face a new form of terrorist threat that is transnational and employs extreme and indiscriminate violence. Terrorists who claim to act in the name of Islam seek to pose an enduring threat to our national security interests. Tackling terrorist and other non-state threats is set to be the most likely use of our armed forces for the foreseeable future. That requires not simply a counter-insurgency response but a multi-faceted and multi-agency approach, with new capabilities that can help us in the work not just of security but of reconstruction and good governance.

North Korea's recent nuclear test is another reminder that proliferation has major security impacts. Belligerence coupled with weapons of mass destruction capabilities has regional and global significance. In addition to

states, the continuing risk that terrorists, criminals, or other non-state actors will get WMD technology is incredibly serious when we live in an era of mass casualty attacks and suicide bombing.

The risks of weak or failing states are also clear. Economic and political weaknesses exacerbate factionalism and often provoke conflict. Supporting sound leadership in vulnerable countries and international approaches to reversing downward spirals of decay will be crucial. As the UK is an internationally engaged power, its domestic security interests depend on effective and efficient international organisations. If organisations such as the United Nations, the international financial institutions and the World Trade Organisation are to remain effective, they must respond rapidly to global changes. The same goes for the organisations that protect and serve the people of Europe—NATO and the European Union. They must all adapt the way in which they work and the speed of their responses. Because legitimacy is crucial to effectiveness, they must also change to give the rising powers a proper voice and influence.

Given those enduring and emerging security challenges, it is right that there should be debate now on the changing characteristics of conflict and how our forces should evolve. Of one thing we can be certain: predicting future conflict remains notoriously difficult. Our experiences defy a single pattern. Yes, there may be a broad consensus that the threat of direct state-led military attacks against Britain is extremely low and will remain low for the foreseeable future, and we all celebrate and welcome that fact. However, states still pose threats to wider security in some cases, for example by acting through non-state proxies. Miscalculations by states in dispute with each other could also lead to conflict, and we could find that we are drawn in if our vital national interests are at stake. We ignore those risks at our peril.

There is broad agreement on some issues. First, it is agreed that for the immediate future terrorists will pose the most frequent and direct threat to the UK and our interests, and that they will do so in ways that will continue to plumb the depths of depravity, using women and children as suicide bombers. Secondly, it is agreed that there will be a continuing demand for our forces to counter terrorism directly, and we must look beyond Afghanistan and apply the lessons that we learn from operations there.

Thirdly, it is agreed that there will be a continuing demand for peace support operations from peace enforcement to low-level stabilisation, either following state collapse or to freeze or end inter-state conflicts. Some of those missions could involve the use of coercive force. Fourthly, it is agreed that increasing complexity is likely to be a feature of the future use of our armed forces. They are likely to find themselves operating together with a range of other agencies, building on today's concept of a comprehensive approach. Finally, it is agreed that there should be an increasing premium on preventive activities across Government, working with allies, partners and non-governmental organisations. The work that we are already doing with the African Union is a prime example, and we should remain leaders in that field.

In all that, we should be mindful that the character of conflict evolves incrementally. Emerging nations will have more of an impact on what we try to do and "host nations" will be crucial, not only for the legitimacy of many operations but in playing a practical role in their planning and conduct.

As an example of both taking preventive action and working with host nations, the Ministry of Defence has a programme of capacity building that extends to 14 states, including Pakistan. The security forces we train are successful in disrupting terrorist plots, so the benefits can be immediate as well as an investment in longer-term security and international relationships.

An important trend, which complicates conflict, is that non-state adversaries using irregular tactics will be increasingly important in international conflicts—not just terrorists but insurgents, criminals, pirates and even disgruntled individuals conducting cyber attacks from their laptops. One practical example of how we are agile enough to counter those threats is the UK's leading role in EU anti-piracy operations in the Indian ocean. Hon. Members will have seen the evidence in today's newspapers of successful Royal Navy action against suspected pirates. The protection of the world's shipping lines is vital for the economy of the world as a whole—and to us, as an island nation, more than many. We will continue to play our part in securing the smooth passage of global trade—something that the Royal Navy has always done marvellously.

Non-state actors often share motivations and aspirations and co-operate and combine to pose new threats. They are likely to change form to defy our efforts to tackle them. The role of intelligence will therefore remain crucial to identifying those variations.

Mr. Jenkin: Yesterday, a Ministry of Defence spokesman confirmed that a British frigate had intervened on pirates off the gulf of Aden who had rocket-propelled grenades in their boats and clearly intended to commit crimes on the high seas, but said that because they were not caught in the act, although the Royal Navy could destroy the weaponry, it had to let them go. Clearly, there is a deficiency in international law or its interpretation, or there is something wrong with our rules of engagement. It cannot be right that pirates, who were caught virtually red-handed, are let go.

Mr. Hutton: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point. However, I do not believe that there is any deficiency in the rules of engagement—we are able to defend not only ourselves but the ships that we are there to protect, and if necessary, to use lethal force to do that. The decision was rightly made by the commander on the ground, operating within the rules that he had been set. We have an agreement with the Kenyan Government for transferring pirates whom we detain on the high seas to the criminal authorities in Kenya. That agreement works well and several pirates have been moved into the Kenyan criminal system, but we continue to consider ways to improve—*[Interruption.]* As I said, the decision was made by the commander on the ground, operating within the rules as he saw them. I am here to support him—I am not trying to do anything other than that. However, I am trying to explain that we reached an international agreement with Kenya, which applies to the EU piracy mission. I do not have the precise figures, but I will give them to the hon. Gentleman.

[Mr. Hutton]

perhaps later in the debate. Many pirates have been detained in those operations and transferred to the Kenyan criminal authorities.

Mr. Jenkin: I do not think that the Secretary of State is addressing the point. Why in that particular case did the rules of engagement require pirates to be released, not taken to Kenya, according to the agreement? What is the legal situation that prevents the captain of a British warship from detaining those people and handing them over to the Kenyan Government?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman suggests that the rules of engagement are the problem. It is nothing to do with them. The commander of the frigate made the decision about whether the evidence would support detention and therefore transfer of the detainees to Kenya. His judgment was that the evidence was not sufficient to bring the case within the framework of the agreement. I am not in a position to second-guess the commander—that is not my job, and I will not be an armchair general, thank you very much. I am here to support the commander's decision, which is perfectly reasonable within the rules in which he was operating. However, if there are ways in which we can improve such operations, we will try to do that.

Mr. Arbuthnot: To what extent does the Secretary of State believe that commanders on the ground or at sea are constrained by their realisation that the piracy problem off the coast of Somalia is more of a land than a maritime problem? Until we address the causes of piracy in Somalia and the economic collapse of that country, we cannot deal with the symptoms in the seas off its coast.

Mr. Hutton: Again, I have a lot of sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman. The piracy mission is clearly dealing with—in his analysis—the symptoms of the problem. We have to protect the shipping lanes around that important artery, so have no choice but to engage the pirates directly. Obviously, it would be better if solutions could be found to Somalia's internal problems. Some work on that is under way, although it needs to gather momentum. The position in Somalia is fiendishly complicated, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, but my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, other EU countries, the United Nations, the United States and others are trying to find ways of addressing the root cause of the problem, which is a classic illustration of what happens in the case of a failed state. There is risk of terrorist activity in the south of Somalia and piracy across the country. There are pockets of good governance, which give us a glimmer of hope, but a hell of a lot of work still needs to be done to try to get Somalia into a better position.

If I am right in my general observations, the question for all of us is how we can best respond to the challenges. Clearly, we must first deal with the threats that we currently face; that is why Afghanistan is the priority for us and, I suspect, will be for some years ahead. The importance that we already attach to its many and interconnected security challenges shows that it is possible to achieve success.

Adaptability and flexibility will be key attributes of force planning. We need to balance our investment in people, equipment and technology to ensure that we have forces that are agile and adaptable to the realities of modern conflict, provide battle-winning capabilities and support our units on the front line. I discussed that and other similar challenges with US Defence Secretary Gates in March when I was in Washington, and I look forward later this year to sharing our analysis of the lessons learned from recent conflicts, including Afghanistan, and what they tell us about the characteristics of future conflict, as well as what they mean for our bilateral defence co-operation in the years ahead.

In response to the new threats, I believe that there are five obvious and immediate priorities for us. The nature of many new threats is such that our response to them will rarely—even primarily—be military. However, when force is required, NATO will remain the cornerstone of our security architecture and we must and will ensure that we can operate with our major allies and partners.

Secondly, we must operate across a spectrum from major combat operations through counter-insurgency and deal with complex challenges. In our 2008 defence strategic guidance, we created a new military task, called military assistance to stabilisation and development—MASD—to ensure that we develop the capability to counter irregular activity and support stabilisation and reconstruction efforts. It is important for the House to note that the new task now formally recognises that UK armed forces should plan and conduct operations to help stabilise and reconstruct in those locations where the security situation is too difficult to allow civilian agencies to work alone.

In practice, that means that we are and will continue to be involved in a variety of activities, including protecting civilian staff, training local security forces or working on engineering projects. It means that UK forces must have the capability to carry out limited reconstruction of, for example, local infrastructure. However, perhaps more often, their main military role will be to build a secure environment in which NGOs and others can operate effectively. Our work in Afghanistan to date demonstrates that that approach can be effective.

Thirdly, we clearly have to prioritise within the resources available. That means managing risk—tackling immediate priorities and most likely future threats—and doing so using structures that are agile and capabilities that are flexible to allow our forces to be able to "stretch, surge and recover".

In my view, our fourth and fifth priorities are international institutional reform and future capability. International institutions have a vital role to play in defence and security as in all other aspects of international policy. The essentials are sound, but we need the right military capabilities to meet the military threats that we face, whether they are from fundamentalist terrorists in Afghanistan or at the periphery of NATO's homeland area.

When I met my ministerial colleagues in Krakow earlier this year, I therefore suggested that NATO needed a rapidly deployable force that could signal our commitment to the defence of alliance territory—we called it the alliance solidarity force—because no potential aggressor must ever be allowed to think that he has a window of opportunity before NATO can effectively respond. I am

glad to say that that has stimulated thinking in NATO, and I look forward to receiving a report back at our ministerial meeting in Brussels next week.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The Secretary of State is moving on from the issue of resources, but I should like briefly to bring him back to it. He has talked about the need to train local military forces to enable NGOs to operate in a much more benign environment when stabilising countries. However, does he think that the application of British resources between the Department for International Development, the Foreign Office and his Department is correctly structured to enable us to achieve the overall outcome that we want across the whole of Government? With so many resources now in DFID and with the problems that it has in applying them to military training, my observation would be that there is now an issue that we need to address. Does the Secretary of State share that conclusion?

Mr. Hutton: I share some thinking in common with the hon. Gentleman. The conflict prevention pool is a useful innovation, and it is proving to be a useful source of resources, helping us to do some of the work in Afghanistan, for example. Have we got every nook and cranny of the policy right? Probably not. There is also the question of how much we are prepared to invest in such initiatives, which is a wider matter on which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor expresses his views from time to time. However, I think that we have the beginnings of a much better approach. It needs to develop and—let us be honest—it could probably do with more resources as well. However, there will be an opportunity to look at such issues in future spending rounds, and I very much hope that it is taken. By the way, I should also inform the hon. Gentleman that I have not finished talking about resources—I am coming back to that subject.

We will always, rightly, look to NATO for collective defence, but I believe strongly that the European Union can play its part too, using armed forces alongside its civilian capabilities. That is not about duplicating what NATO can do. Indeed, the real problem is that European countries have too few defence capabilities, not too many. I want to see Europeans developing more capability that they can put at the service of NATO or the European Union. I want to see Europeans taking more responsibility for solving the world's problems, whether through NATO or the European Union. I also want the European Union to show what it can do when it focuses on outcomes rather than institutions, as it has done in countering piracy in the gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia, for example.

In sum, we need organisations that can respond, recognise the nature of a risk when it appears, think rapidly and imaginatively across boundaries, flex resources to where they are needed and work in partnership to implement solutions. I hope that we can leave behind the old yah-boo anti-Europeanism that has bedevilled debates on the subject in the past, because it does not advance our national security interests. Instead, it hinders them.

As for our capability, I would mention just two emerging priorities. We will need to build and maintain an advantage over our adversaries in information and decision making. Advanced forms of collection, including through unmanned aerial vehicles, should be integrated in our forces and not just seen as an additional luxury. We will also need to develop capabilities that protect our information networks from increasingly sophisticated attacks. Such non-kinetic attacks on our vital infrastructure from cyberspace are clearly attractive to our adversaries, and we have got to counter them. How we decide on the appropriate capabilities and how we acquire them on time and on budget will be vital to the success of our armed forces in defeating the threats that we now face and might face in future.

Today we do not just have to plan for contingent threats against a sophisticated state adversary, where the practical implications of our planning assumptions are tested in large part by their deterrence effect. As the past decade has instead proved, today our armed forces are engaged in less conventional, counter-insurgency and peace enforcement operations in defence of our national security, so now our planning assumptions are tested in the heat of battle, with no room for delay or failure. Every one of our servicemen and women has the right to know that we are doing everything possible to ensure that every pound of investment in our equipment programme goes towards the front line and is not wasted in inefficient or weak processes of acquisition.

That is why I asked Bernard Gray in December last year to conduct a detailed examination of progress in implementing the MOD's acquisition change programme, as I hope right hon. and hon. Members will recall. I have to be satisfied that the current programme of change is sufficient to meet the challenges of the new combat environment that we now face. To date, I am not. I expect to receive the report shortly. Bernard Gray has conducted a thorough and wide-ranging analysis. I am confident that when his report is published, it will be both honest about the scale of the task that confronts us and clear in describing a detailed and radical blueprint to reform the process of acquisition in the MOD from top to bottom. That is something that we must get right. There can be no room for complacency, and given the current tempo of operations, we have no choice but to act with urgency. I will publish Bernard Gray's report before the summer recess, and I will come to the House again to outline the Government's response to it.

Given the size of the challenge that we face, I am in no doubt whatever that change must happen and that it must be radical. There must be changes to the system and structure of acquisition process, changes to the incentives that drive and determine behaviours—behaviours that have often led to waste, delay and efficiency, bedevilling the efforts of both Labour and Conservative Governments over a long period—and changes to the skills sets of those involved in acquisition. I am committed to doing everything that I can to make it possible for our armed forces to be better served, and I will make future announcements in due course.

Most members of today's armed forces joined after 9/11, in the new security environment that it created. That is the context in which they have always experienced operations. Their language is that of counter-insurgency and their primary enemy is the terrorist in civilian clothing, indistinguishable from the civilians he mingles with—the terrorist who threatens not just our people, but our friends and allies across the world. Our edge in defeating that threat is acquired in the training that our people receive and the equipment that they use, which is

[Mr. Hutton]

second to none, backed up by satellite bandwidth or a UAV controlled from thousands of miles away. We must ensure that our policies, systems and capabilities reflect today's realities, so that those who serve today are given the best support possible. However, we will fail those who will serve us in years to come if we fail to plan now for tomorrow's emerging threats. I will not allow that to happen.

2.27 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring) (Con): May I add my tribute on behalf of all my Conservative colleagues to the military personnel and civilians from this country who have been killed or injured, including Cyrus Thatcher? They have sacrificed themselves for our safety. There is not a man, woman or child in this country who does not owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of all those who have made that sacrifice on our behalf.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Fox: No, I will not.

It says everything about the priorities of the current Government and their business managers that the annual debate on defence in the world is squeezed by a topical debate, on a day when they knew that most MPs would be away from the House. I can just hear the Government business managers asking, "What subject is so unimportant that we can stick it in the Commons on polling day for the European and local elections?" and the answer coming back, "Why not defence in the world? It's only about Iraq, Afghanistan and the rest—nothing terribly important." It leaves most of us on the Conservative Benches virtually speechless that a debate of such importance to our national interest, the well-being of our armed forces and the morale of their families should have its annual slot reduced to less than four hours.

In the year since we last held this debate the world has become a more, not less, dangerous place. Nine thousand British troops in Afghanistan are engaged in some of the heaviest fighting since the Korean war. As our ground troops come home from Iraq, the mission of the Royal Navy is now in question because the Government have failed to secure a legal mandate with Baghdad. Russia is rearming, and still occupying Abkhazia and South Ossetia—with illegitimate elections recently having been held in the latter—and it has threatened to militarise the Arctic region, to the great concern of our close allies in NATO, especially Norway and Canada.

Piracy is running rife, not only off the horn of Africa but in less mentioned places such as the gulf of Guinea and the strait of Molucca. NATO is struggling to find its way in the 21st century, and the EU is aiming to increase its defence integration. Iran, in an unprecedented move, recently deployed six warships to the gulf of Aden, is on the verge of acquiring a nuclear weapon, and in eight days' time will hold presidential elections that will have a huge impact on future policy.

The Taliban were recently operating within 60 miles of Islamabad, and as I speak, Pakistani security forces are heavily engaged in offensive operations across the north west frontier and the federally administered tribal areas. North Korea has tested its second nuclear bomb, is preparing another long-range missile test, and has torn up the armistice that brought an end to the 1950-1953 Korean war.

The British armed forces are participating in about 15 NATO, EU, United Nations and OSCE operations around the globe, and we have a military presence in the form of 41,000 British troops in 32 countries and overseas territories. It is against that backdrop that the Government have decided to hold a debate on this subject today, meaning that, for obvious reasons, it will be poorly attended in the House and go largely unreported in the press. The real tragedy is that we need more, not less, understanding among the British public of the threats to our wider national security.

When we think about Operation Telic and the presence of British forces in Iraq, we mainly think about the contribution of our ground forces—and let us make no mistake: the men and women serving in our Army and the Royal Air Force have contributed bravely and professionally to make Iraq a better place. I associate myself with all the Secretary of State's comments about the huge and historic role that they have played in contributing to the future well-being of that country.

Recently, however, the focus has been placed increasingly on the Royal Navy and the outstanding work that it has been doing in training the Iraqi navy and protecting Iraqi oil platforms. I say "has been doing" because, as has been reported this week and confirmed by the Government, the British and Iraqi Governments have failed to finalise a deal to enable the remaining British forces in Iraq to continue to train their Iraqi counterparts after last Sunday. Consequently, there are about 700 UK soldiers and sailors without a legal mandate in Iraq who are unable to carry out their training mission with the Iraqi navy.

Furthermore, it is rumoured—I would welcome Government confirmation of this—that at least two British warships have been removed from the combined taskforce 158, which provides security for Iraqi oil platforms and ports in the northern Persian gulf, the economic lifeblood of Iraq that they have been asked to protect. This has forced an additional and unexpected burden on to our allies in the region, who are having to fill the gap. This applies most notably to the Americans, who claim not to have the resources available to meet this requirement. Our Navy has an extremely important role in the Gulf, and it is extremely well respected in the region by our allies. I would say to all those who talk about a lack of respect in the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom that they ought to go and talk to those serving in the American fifth fleet. They would find out just how highly those people regard the Royal Navy and how important its contribution is in that part of the world.

It is unacceptable to have up to 700 British service personnel without a legal mandate in Iraq, especially when that has a negative impact on our relationship with the US. The Government should have sorted this issue out during President Maliki's recent visit to London in April. At that time, they were upbeat about what might happen, and the Secretary of State has been relatively upbeat today, but we should not really have reached this point, should we?

Mr. Hutton: No, we should not have reached this point. Unfortunately we have, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that that is not for the want of trying by Her Majesty's Government. I want to make it quite clear, however, that the position that he described with regard to the lack of a legal mandate is not accurate. The legal mandate for the UK forces' presence in Iraq expires on 31 July. It is true that our mandate to conduct operational and training activities expired on 31 May, but it is not the case that the remaining UK forces in Afghanistan lack jurisdiction or effective protection under the agreements that we have with the Iraqi Government.

Dr. Fox: I am grateful for that clarification—although I am sure that the Secretary of State meant to say "Iraq", not "Afghanistan". That is reassuring, but it does not get away from the fact that we have failed to reach agreement on a matter that is of great importance not only to our armed forces but to our allies.

What about the so-called British legacy in Iraq that we have heard so much about? The last time we heard about this matter from the Government in the House, we were told that there were only four locally hired contractors representing British trade interests in Iraq, all of whom were apparently based in Baghdad, leaving Iraq's second city, Basra, and the northern city of Irbil completely neglected. As I have said in the House before, and as echoed by many of my right hon. and hon. Friends, our lack of trade presence means that we may have shed blood for Iraq, but stand little chance as a country of benefiting from the contracts flowing from Iraq's fiscal surplus. There is a lot of potential for Iraq to become a regional financial and trading hub, and we must do all we can to ensure that that becomes a reality. A stable and prosperous Iraq, as the Secretary of State says, is in all our interests, but a strong UK role in supporting this is also in both our interests.

I now turn to Afghanistan. As we head into the summer months, and leading up to the presidential election, our forces are confronting a resurgent Taliban across most of the country. Compared with this time last year, there has been a 55 per cent. increase in coalition deaths. IED—improvised explosive device—events are up by 80 per cent. and there has been a 90 per cent. increase in attacks on the Afghan Government. Since January there have been more than twice the number of insurgent-initiated attacks in Helmand than in Kandahar, the province with the next highest number attacks.

It has been said by many that the No. 1 objective of any counter-insurgency campaign is to protect the local population. This was accomplished against all the odds in Iraq, thanks to the clear views of General Petraeus, and one aspect of the Iraq surge can be, and needs to be, replicated in Afghanistan. I understand, of course, that there are no direct parallels, but there are undoubtedly lessons to learn from the other experience.

One lesson that needs to come across to the British public is that 80 per cent. of the civilian deaths in Afghanistan are caused by the Taliban, not by coalition forces. While that does not excuse civilian deaths, and demonstrates that we are still unable to protect the local population in the way that we would like, there is a story here that needs to be told. There is a misrepresentation in some foreign media that our forces are systematically targeting and killing Afghan civilians, which could not be further from the truth. Unlike the Taliban, our troops do everything possible to minimise the threats to civilians. It is a point that our own media should focus on a lot more, because in this political environment we must not allow negative stereotypes to be created by default, which is a risk we are running. As the incoming American commander, Lieutenant-General McChrystal, said during his Senate confirmation hearing this week,

> "The measure of effectiveness will not be enemy killed, it will be the number of Afghans shielded from violence."

That is the difference between us in this conflict.

On my last trip to Helmand in March, I was pleased to find a renewed shift of emphasis from the central Government in Kabul to more focus on provincial and district governments across all of Afghanistan. The problem of governance in the country, including widespread corruption, must be tackled because it is undermining our efforts to achieve stability. Focus needs to be placed on empowering local and district governments. Local solutions for local problems has been the only way in most of Afghanistan for thousands of years, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) said in an earlier intervention. To believe that we can have working democratic central Government without first having working local government is naïve, especially when in many cases we are dealing with tribal codes that pre-date even Islam.

I think most would agree with the Government that everything must be done to build the capability of Afghan security forces. The Afghan national army has come a very long way and is probably the most respected governmental institution in the country, although it still has some way to go. The Afghan national police, on the other hand, are viewed by the majority of Afghan citizens as incompetent and corrupt, and will continue to present the biggest challenge to the west, particularly in terms of capacity building, for some time to come.

While we are on the subject of Afghan security forces, will the Secretary of State take today's opportunity to expand on the comments of his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who said on 29 April that

> "as the US moves in, we will over time shift the balance of our operations away from front-line combat and towards an enhanced contribution to training both the army in Afghanistan and its police."—[*Official Report*, 29 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 870.]?

Will the Government provide us today with some idea of a timeline? Will the number of British troops stay the same as this shift of operations occurs? I am sure that the whole House would be interested to know what mission UK forces in Helmand province will have after the 10,000 US marines are deployed there. How will we avoid ending up with what ultimately might be called "Charge of the Knights syndrome", with a small force, dwarfed by the Americans territorially and numerically, that is less and less in control of events?

The problems of Afghanistan and Pakistan are increasingly recognised as being inseparable. We cannot achieve stability and security in Afghanistan until we disrupt the Taliban/al-Qaeda network attacking from Pakistan. Just across the border from our forces, Pakistan faces an existential threat from Islamist extremism. Unfortunately for Pakistan and the west, it is a threat that Pakistan is ill-equipped to fight. The Pakistani armed forces are trained, resourced and manned for

[Dr. Fox]

state-on-state warfare against a perceived threat from India. I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on that subject.

About 65 per cent. of the Pakistani military is Punjabi, yet the area along the border where the military is operating is predominantly Pashtun. To all intents and purposes, members of the Pakistani military are regarded as foreigners in the federally administered tribal areas and their presence can at times exacerbate the situation. Although we must train and equip the Pakistani military for counter-insurgency operations, we must do all we can to build Pakistani capability in the round, especially in policing and the Frontier Corps in FATA.

Lastly, will the Secretary of State update the House on how many of the 5,000 NATO troops promised at Strasbourg have arrived in Afghanistan? They were promised ahead of the presidential elections in August, which are only a couple of months away. There has been little mention of the status of those troops, or of how many of those promised have arrived on the ground.

Failure in Afghanistan cannot be an option, for two reasons. First, it could mean the effective end of the NATO alliance. What would happen to our credibility and to the cohesion of NATO if we were seen to have failed our first major test since the end of the cold war? Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, a defeat of western forces in Afghanistan would act as a shot in the arm for all Islamic fundamentalists worldwide. To every jihadist, it would be a sign of weakness in our resolve. Neither outcome can be acceptable to us.

At the weekend I visited Hong Kong and Singapore, where one very different security topic dominated the media. North Korea's detonation on 25 May of its second nuclear bomb was a clear breach of UN Security Council resolution 1718. Here in London, there is a tendency to sit back and watch events unfold in North Korea as if there was no impact on the national interests of the United Kingdom and in the hope that others, such as the US and China, will take care of matters. However, the truth is that, like it or not, we are affected by events in North Korea.

Last week at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Asian security conference, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said:

> "North Korea's nuclear programme and actions constitute a threat to regional peace and security."

All in the House could endorse that statement. The transfer of nuclear weapons or material to other nations or non-state actors should be viewed as a threat to the security of this country, our allies and our wider global interests. North Korea is notoriously unpredictable, and at the moment its motives and the likely next steps are extremely unclear. The North Korean regime has sold missile technology to Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Syria. Consequently, it is not irrational to believe that future sales by North Korea might include nuclear technology and know-how.

That nuclear threat is being mirrored in the middle east by Iran, in another clear breach of international law. I have heard voices on both sides of the House say that we should learn to accommodate Iran as a nuclear weapons state. I believe that there are three reasons why we must not. The first is the nature of the regime itself, and the second the willingness of Iran to destabilise its neighbours via Hezbollah and Hamas. We have seen their involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon and Israel. Do we want fissile material added to that mix?

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, if Iran gets a nuclear weapon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are all likely to want to follow suit. Our failure to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions will inevitably lead to the potential for a nuclear arms race, with all the costs, dangers and futility that that would bring. Surely we want to leave something better to the next generation than a nuclear arms race in the world's most unstable region.

I first raised the issue of Arctic security in last year's debate on defence in the world, and I remember hearing laughter from Labour Members, including some who now speak on defence matters from the Front Bench. Since then the topic of Arctic security has become well reported in the press and has been the subject of countless articles in military journals. Two of our close NATO allies have explicitly said that the Arctic region remains their greatest security challenge. According to the Canadians, Arctic security is listed as No. 1 of Canada's six core military missions. The security of what the Norwegians call their high north is the top policy concern for our allies in Norway, too.

We will all face many challenges in the Arctic as the ice melts and the scramble for resources heats up. With ice melting there, and increased piracy in shipping lanes in warmer climates, the shorter shipping routes in the high north will become more appealing. Already more than 11 million tonnes of oil per year pass through the Barents sea alone. As a leader in NATO, and because 95 per cent. of British international trade in goods travels by sea, we are forced to take an active interest in Arctic security matters.

Many agree that NATO, as Europe's No. 1 guarantor of security, has an important role in the Arctic, and of course we must agree, as four of the five Arctic powers are members of NATO. Another reason why NATO must take the Arctic seriously is that Russia takes it seriously. It is a not very widely commented on fact that back in March this year Moscow released a strategy paper outlining Russia's plans to create a new military force to protect its interests in the disputed Arctic. The paper said that the Arctic must become Russia's "top strategic resource base" by 2020.

Russian military involvement in the Arctic, including ground, air and maritime capabilities, is already quite prevalent. It has been reported that Russia has two fully equipped brigades, considered by some to be the best equipped brigades in the Russian army, stationed along the 120-mile border with Norway. Russian air patrols have increased in recent years and are now at peak cold war levels. When Russian bombers fly down the Norwegian coast and reach the city of Bodø, where Norwegian F-16s are based for NATO air patrols, they can be tracked practising bombing runs out at sea before continuing with their patrols.

Russia's northern fleet is considered the largest and most powerful of Russia's four naval fleets. About two thirds of all the Russian navy's nuclear force is based within the northern fleet. It also has Russia's only operating aircraft carrier. To add to the capabilities of the northern fleet, there are plans to increase the number of nuclear-powered ice breakers, including the

world's largest, at a time when our only ice breaker, HMS Endurance, is being towed back to the United Kingdom with an uncertain future.

To put matters in perspective, although a direct military confrontation between western forces and Russia in the Arctic is highly unlikely, there is certainly scope for misunderstanding, which could escalate tensions, and that is what we must try to avoid. We need to find ways of minimising friction and improving dialogue. Perhaps NATO could be used as a way to increase awareness and co-operation with Russia in the Arctic region—especially in areas of mutual concern such as search and rescue. Unlike in the rest of Russia, in the Barents region of Russia the view of NATO is very positive, with up to 70 per cent. of those polled supporting NATO having a role in the Arctic. The outlook is not entirely bleak, but both sides will have to show a willingness to co-operate.

Since our last debate, one of the trends has been the growing awareness of maritime threats. Somali pirates are currently causing chaos off the coast of Africa in the gulf of Aden—one of the world's busiest shipping routes. We need to realise that the long-term problems associated with piracy need to be dealt with on land and not at sea, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot) has said. The present conditions in Somalia promote piracy, lawlessness, instability, unchecked crime and poverty. The international community needs to do a better job of co-ordinating the military response to piracy in the gulf of Aden. Rules of engagement and better command and control need to be established as well as the operational situation will allow.

Currently off the horn of Africa are two combined maritime forces headquartered in Bahrain, CTF 150 and CTF 151, the European-led Operation Atalanta, assets from the standing NATO maritime group 1, and individual ships from India, Russia, Malaysia, China and Iran. All are conducting anti-piracy operations, security escorts and counter-terrorism operations in the region, and each operates under a different set of rules of engagement. To make matters more complicated, there are no formal command relationship agreements to co-ordinate their missions.

Having multiple maritime security operations all aiming to accomplish the same missions and all operating in the same area without formal co-operation is duplicative and dangerous, and could lead to failure. Also, attention to counter-terrorism operations in the region cannot be jeopardised by the current concern about piracy. Bad as the situation seems to us now, it could easily become much worse. Most piracy off the horn of Africa is criminally motivated: it is a quick way to make money. However, there is the larger threat of an organised global terrorist network, such as al-Qaeda, becoming directly involved with the piracy. As things stand, most piracy is driven by criminal factions that benefit from the lawless nature of a failed state. Just imagine what the outcome would be of a piracy campaign sponsored, planned, and executed by al-Qaeda.

On 19 May the European Union decided to extend the area of operations of its anti-piracy mission by almost a third. Can Ministers tell us whether there are plans to provide more resources for the mission, or whether the EU will simply ask its member states to do more with less?

Piracy is just one piece of a very complicated maritime security jigsaw, which includes counter-terrorism, keeping shipping lanes and oil platforms secured in the Gulf, and deterring the Iranian navy. Piracy will never be completely eradicated from the seas, as history tends to suggest, but we must do all we can to minimise the threat.

Other, newer threats to our security are emerging, in cyberspace and space in particular. The recent speech by Secretary Gates was particularly interesting in its reorientation of American policy on those threats. We need to debate these issues in the House in detail, and I hope that a specific time will be found for us to do so, but today the list that I have given—mirroring what was said by the Secretary of State—will suffice. International terrorism, fundamentalist extremism, rogue states, piracy and nuclear proliferation are enough for us to be getting on with.

We must constantly pay tribute to the bravery of our armed forces and their families, our intelligence services, and the numerous civilian organisations that support them and us with the security that we too often take for granted. Let me issue a plea to the Government: perhaps next time our debate on their contribution will not be timetabled for the parliamentary relegation zone, but will be given the time appropriate to their importance and their sacrifice.

2.52 pm

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I listened with great interest to the speech of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), but I cannot agree with his statement about the inappropriateness of today for the debate. I think it highly appropriate that we are here in the House on the day of the European elections, discussing defence in the world, because it is thanks to the European Union—its emphasis on consensus, co-operation, discussion, debate and working together while simultaneously cherishing the unique and independent nature of member states—that we, citizens of Europe, have experienced the longest period of peace in our history.

Dr. Fox: The hon. Lady speaks of the appropriateness of the timing of the debate. Just for the *Hansard* record, would she care to tell us how many Labour Back Benchers are currently present?

Mrs. Moon: The hon. Gentleman clearly has poor eyesight if he needs my help in ascertaining that.

Dr. Fox: One!

Mrs. Moon: The hon. Gentleman shouts "one" from a sedentary position—but, on the other hand, it is me.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): It is I!

Mrs. Moon: I do apologise; I am a product of a comprehensive education.

It is said that freedom is never free, but that it comes at a price—a price exemplified by what we are willing to pay to defend our freedom. Why am I here today, rather than knocking on doors and getting out the vote? I am here because I recognise that a debate on defence in the world is one of the most critical debates that we as a

[Mrs. Moon]

country must engage in. Defence is where we stand tall and are clear about our priorities, our values, and those things that we will defend to the last—those things that we will ask our young to fight to defend.

On Saturday, I will be in Porthcawl to commemorate D-day—a day when so many died, and whose sacrifice we continue to remember and honour. In Porthcawl, a sleepy seaside town in Wales, D-day affected every family; throughout the town, people knew members of the armed forces who were stationed there practising both landings on to our beaches and getting from them into our sand dunes. Families also remembered going down to the railway station a few years earlier to collect sick, wounded and exhausted soldiers returning from Dunkirk and taking them home to feed and care for. In the years since D-day, much has changed in terms of defence, but much has remained the same, too. However, such immediate and direct connection between us as citizens and our armed forces and our personal understanding of the need for security and defence have, I fear, been weakened. A deepening disengagement has arisen between the public and our armed forces, but I know that, as Members, we take seriously the responsibility to help re-establish that engagement.

Nowadays, the enemy we need to defend ourselves against is less clear. The nation-to-nation battlefront has been replaced by the insidious fear of an enemy that is unpredictable, unseen and global. We face pandemics such as swine fever and bird flu, which is carried by fellow citizens who are free to travel the world, but also, potentially, carried deliberately by terrorists. We have tsunamis, heat waves and hurricanes as our climate change brings with it threats of food, water and energy shortages. Pirate DVDs are sold, sometimes to law-abiding citizens, and people traffickers and drug dealers sell their goods, all of which can fund terrorism and crime. New technology brings new threats—cyber attacks, asymmetrical warfare—and the internet has grown into a powerful voice, where small mistakes can have huge consequences.

Our defence against those threats is a broad security toolkit, which includes not only our armed forces, but our politicians, diplomats and security services, and our law enforcement, ambulance and coastguard agencies and other emergency services, as well as our economists, non-governmental organisations and citizens. Together, they exemplify the fact that security is the prime function of the state, for without the state there is no rule of law, no peace, no stability and no security.

Defence is no longer the remit only of the Ministry of Defence; every Department of State has a defence role to play. That includes supporting education around the world, establishing individual freedoms, protecting human rights wherever they are attacked, creating fair-trade agreements to allow countries to develop, and the promotion of democracy and the rule of law both nationally and internationally.

Defence in a global world requires working with regional partners in institutions such as the European Union and NATO, and with countries with whom we have memorandums of understanding, treaties, defence obligations and where agreements have been signed, and also with global bodies such as the G20, the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, to build consensus and co-operation.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that in relation to defence and the European Union there is a great deal to be said for our ensuring that our bottom line is defending ourselves, because our first duty is to our constituents and the country at large?

Mrs. Moon: I fail to see what the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve by that question. *[Interruption.]* May I complete the point? Obviously we have an individual responsibility to our constituents and our nation state has a responsibility to its citizens, but as I said at the beginning, it is thanks to our European consensus and our European involvement that we have maintained peace across Europe for longer than at any time in our history.

Mr. Cash: Absolute rubbish.

Mrs. Moon: I apologise if the hon. Gentleman thinks I am talking rubbish—I obviously spoke the same rubbish when I taught history.

The United Nations agreed the universal declaration of human rights as far back as 1948, and many individuals from across the political spectrum have argued that we have a moral duty to ensure that human rights are protected no matter where the abuses occur. Anyone who watched Kate Adie's programme on Tiananmen Square last night and saw the ongoing effect of those events on those who were present will understand how far we still have to travel for all members of the Security Council to understand the central tenet of human rights. A discussion on the future role of the United Nations is long overdue. Should the Security Council be expanded to give wider credibility to its voice and decisions? Would the inclusion of India and Brazil, as emerging economically powerful nations, widen the legitimacy of UN decisions and heighten the interdependency of our world?

Despite this criticism, it was only the UN, in 2000, that could unanimously pass resolution 1325, which addressed the impact of war on women and called for their involvement in peace and resolution discussions and at all levels of decision making in conflict-resolution talks. Why women? The answer is that the most vulnerable person in the front line of any conflict is not in the military—it is the female civilian. It remains the men with the guns who get to the peace table; women are for the non-governmental organisations and the male leaders to sort out. I earnestly believe that resolution 1325 must become a central tenet of our capacity building, if for no other reason than that we know that the wider engagement of women in their communities and in their countries through education and employment can increase a country's gross domestic product by 3 per cent.

I am a new member of the Select Committee on Defence. Unlike its other members, I have no background in defence, although my father served in the Merchant Navy and for many years was active in the Sea Cadet Corps. As a child of the '60s, I marched against war and joined CND. Before I entered the House, my background was in health and social care, child and adult protection,

women's rights and the environment, so what am I doing on the Defence Committee and, indeed, in this debate? *[Laughter.]* There is laughter from the gentlemen on the Conservative Benches, who clearly do not feel that women have a right to a voice in defence matters, and that perhaps shows the problem that women face in entering the world of defence; it remains the macho world of the virile male who has failed to protect women for generations.

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con) *rose—*

Mrs. Moon: I shall certainly give way to the courteous hon. Lady, as opposed to the giggling people on the Conservative Front Bench.

Ann Winterton: As someone who has been interested in defence for some time and has built up a slight expertise in one particular area, may I say that my male colleagues have been very helpful and supportive? It is a very good thing that the hon. Lady is on the Defence Committee and I hope that she enjoys her work. She will learn a lot about the defence world and will be able to contribute greatly.

Mrs. Moon: I thank the hon. Lady for those remarks. I can confirm to her that my colleagues on the Defence Committee have been highly supportive, most helpful and extremely courteous. My comments were not aimed at the members of the Defence Committee.

Mr. Arbuthnot: May I put on the record that I confirm precisely what my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Ann Winterton) said?

Mrs. Moon: I can confirm that the right hon. Gentleman, the Chairman of the Defence Committee, has been one of the most courteous.

I am a member of the Committee because I recognise that defending our way of life, with all its failings and faults, is imperative. The people who died on D-day and in the days before and after that enabled us to enjoy the freedoms that we sadly take for granted—to have the quality of life and to have the expansion of health, education and opportunities across the sexes and classes that we enjoy in Britain today. As citizens of this country we have a balance of rights, interests and responsibilities. So too, as a citizen of the world, our nation has rights to defend and responsibilities to discharge. Sometimes, as in the past, the maintenance of those rights and the discharge of those responsibilities in the wider world require the applications of force.

At present, we are actively involved in conflict in Afghanistan, in a crucial battle against the Taliban that must be won in order to ensure any modicum of security in an unsettled region and across the world. It is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan. We do not want that country once again to be a base for international terrorism that threatens us all.

Since joining the Defence Committee, I have also joined the armed forces parliamentary scheme so that I can flesh out my hinterland of understanding of the recruitment, selection, training, skills, equipment and pressures on our military. I am spending a year with the RAF and have been deeply impressed by the dedication, focus and skills of everyone I have met.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): An increasing number of young ladies are now playing roles in the armed forces. What is the hon. Lady's view of females being put in the front line of infantry regiments, in the killing field?

Mrs. Moon: We have women in the front line in all sorts of roles, and women have shown their capacity to meet the requirements of the front line in those roles. I see no problem in women undertaking front-line roles.

Later this year, as part of the scheme, I will visit Afghanistan and I look forward to seeing not only the security activities of our forces, but the work they are undertaking in capacity building, protecting civilians, stabilisation and reconstruction, the use of aid, training and political engagement. That is work our forces have undertaken over the years across the globe, and of which we can be rightly proud.

If we are to be successful in the region, we must also undertake those responsibilities in Pakistan. We know that Pakistan, as a nuclear state, faces instability. We know that the Taliban have secured bases in Pakistan. The risk to the world of an unstable Pakistan or a Pakistan where the Taliban have access to nuclear weapons is too frightening to contemplate.

Our armed forces have played a crucial role in keeping peace in the Balkans. Across Africa, we are looking at protecting civilians and at stabilisation and reconstruction. In the Falklands, we still maintain a critical military presence, providing security to the people who live on those islands.

It is inevitable that as some of the old threats to our national security begin to fade others will replace them, but our common values of democracy, individual liberty, the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of disputes require us to be vigilant and prepared. Sometimes our armed forces will have to be deployed to defend those values. When those occasions arise, we must ensure that we are fully prepared, that our armed forces are resourced and that they are fully supported both before and after deployment. They rightly deserve quality housing for their families and quality training and equipment. As we increasingly understand the effects of trauma from the tasks that our forces are asked to carry out, the experiences that they encounter and the grief that they face, we must also provide quality psychological support both before and after deployment.

I understand that in this complex world, the MOD has two key tasks: defending the United Kingdom and its interests while strengthening international peace and stability. As we approach the anniversary of D-day, it would perhaps be appropriate to remind ourselves of a quote from Winston Churchill:

"We sleep soundly in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm."

3.12 pm

Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): I always welcome the opportunity to debate defence in the world, but I echo the observations of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). There is one date in the annual parliamentary calendar that is the most notorious graveyard slot, and that is usually the first Thursday in May, when we have a round of local elections. This year, it happens to be in June and is even more of a graveyard slot, because the

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local elections coincide with the European elections. I was absolutely astonished to see this piece of timetabling when the agenda came out for this week. Nevertheless, we plough on and this is a welcome opportunity to discuss these matters.

Like others, I start by paying tribute to those who have lost their lives in the service of our country. On this occasion, as we are having this debate at a time when operations in Iraq are largely concluded and withdrawal is about to commence, I particularly want to say that although my colleagues and I did not agree with the decision to invade Iraq, we very much pay tribute to the courage, professionalism and dedication of all those who have served throughout the engagement in Iraq, including those who have given their lives and those who have come back from those operations wounded in body and in mind. They have done what the nation called on them to do and we should pay tribute to the service that they have given.

Mr. Jenkin: I want to refer to the hon. Gentleman's earlier point about the timing of the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) suggested that the debate was taking place now because the Government regard it as unimportant. Perhaps it is because they regard this debate as so important and yet embarrassing, because of the failures of Government policy, that they have decided to put it on this day.

Nick Harvey: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I suspect we will never know quite why it was, but the discussion that the hon. Member for Woodspring imagined taking place in the Leader of the House's office sounded altogether authentic to my way of thinking.

Although the debate does, in a sense, mark the end of most of our activity in Iraq, I am sure, and hope very much, that we will regularly debate not only the state of security in that country and the wider region but the progress of economic development—a subject that has been mentioned—so that we can judge over the longer term what the overall impact of the west's involvement there has been. However, our attention now rightly focuses largely on Afghanistan, where our troops are working tirelessly, but where it is widely recognised that we have a long, hard job still to do. There is no prospect, in any way, of a quick fix. The death toll has risen quickly in recent weeks, and the insurgents are constantly employing new and ever more deadly methods, to which we have to find new ways of responding.

The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who speaks in the House on defence procurement matters, said in response to a question on Monday in this Chamber that more and more equipment was being delivered to the front line, and we have to hope that that is right. In some cases, he did not give many indications of numbers and quantities; I suppose that he might reasonably say that he would not want to broadcast some of that information. However, we still have serious ongoing concerns, both about the provision of armoured vehicles—I readily acknowledge the significant progress that has been made on that—and about helicopter lift capacity, which will become a real problem the longer the engagement goes on in Afghanistan.

I think that it was the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) who tabled a question some months ago about the likely availability of helicopters in years to come, as existing helicopters go out of commission. Making even the most optimistic assumptions about the in-service date for new helicopters that will follow, one can see that there are serious problems coming up in the next few years. I still do not feel that we have heard any adequate response from the Government on how we will get our helicopter lift capacity up to that which the troops need in Afghanistan. I welcome initiatives such as the one that the Government undertook with the French Government to try to boost the availability of helicopters at a European level, but thus far, I do not think that it has yielded much. I hope that they will stick at it, though, and I hope that more NATO countries will provide helicopters for the operation. However, the last time I saw an answer on the subject, only three had been committed; they were from the Czech Republic.

The lack of helicopter capacity is becoming a big issue. People have been going on about it for a long time, but I just do not feel that a response commensurate to the challenge has been forthcoming. I know that we await decisions on some routine procurements, whether they be from AgustaWestland or whoever, but I wonder whether the sheer scale of the problem will require interim solutions to be found, even if ultimately longer-term solutions will point in a different direction. There is an availability of helicopters, although they are possibly not of the sort of capability that we would ideally want in the helicopters that we will build and develop in the long term. However, there are short-term solutions, if the Government are willing to consider them.

It has already been said in this debate that any consideration of Afghanistan increasingly needs to take into account the situation in Pakistan. Obviously, the Americans have done that by appointing a single envoy to deal with both problems. There are very worrying developments that should cause us all concern. The unstable state of Pakistan is greatly worrying. Although its Government's forces have hit back seemingly quite effectively recently, the underlying problems are there for all to see. Also, increasingly reports are coming through of Taliban elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan coming together—up to now they have had certain tensions, and there have been difficulties between them—because they recognise that they have a new challenge to face, particularly as America is committing more troops to Afghanistan. It is hard to predict or sense exactly how that will play out on the ground, but it raises the point that, as far as quite authoritative reports would have us believe, the Pakistan intelligence agency had, for good or ill, been providing resources to the Afghanistan elements of the Taliban in anticipation of having to deal with them at some point after the west had completed its operations in Afghanistan. Those elements are now cosying up to the Pakistan Taliban, so we end up with the possibility—by no means unprecedented—that the Pakistani military will find itself confronting an enemy to whom it has contributed arms and equipment. That, I hope, will at the very least give it pause for thought in terms of the future, because there is a self-perpetuating cycle in the region, whereby funds that are given for one purpose end up having a completely different and unanticipated impact.

The spill-over between the two countries is potentially difficult, because to date NATO's Afghanistan operation has relied very much on safe and easy routes through Pakistan and on the resolute support of Pakistan. The question of whether in the future we will be able to count on that to anything like the same degree worries me considerably.

I, like the official Opposition's Front-Bench team, have said in previous defence debates that there is a long overdue need for a strategic defence review. It remains a mystery to me why the Government, uniquely, do not seem to think it necessary. We know that the Ministry of Defence is under intense budgetary pressure: there is, by anyone's reckoning, a black hole in its budget; we regularly discuss in the House the impact of overstretch and ongoing operations; and we know that the difficulties, needs and demands on the defence budget will increase inexorably year on year. However, we know also that, in the wake of the economic crisis, the next Government will have a major task on their hands to try to control public expenditure in such a fashion that restores some equilibrium to the nation's finances. They will have to take some immensely difficult decisions, balancing the different demands on the public purse which will come from the different Departments. In that context, in particular, a strategic defence review is absolutely fundamental and necessary.

We have to ask the basic question, what does the nation expect its armed forces to do in the years to come and how can we achieve that? The question has also to be asked, are we all still of the view, as I am, that we should continue the task set out in the previous strategic defence review of acting as a force for good throughout the world? Some have called it liberal interventionism, and if the answer is yes, that we are, what are its implications for manpower, equipment and expenditure? If those of us who believe that we should remain willing to play such a part want to take the public with us and convince them that, in the climate that I have described, painful and difficult choices have to be made between competing demands on the public purse, the only way in which we can hope to do so is by having a major national debate about the armed forces' role and the resources that should be made available to them. The only sensible way to go about that is through a Government-conducted defence review, and I very much hope that, whatever Government are in power after the election, which cannot be far away, they will see that, if we want to continue to play such a part, we need to take the public with us.

Dr. Fox: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is also a need for better predictability and empiricism in the process? Does he agree also that we need to begin a defence review by asking what Britain's national interests are; what the predictable threat environment is; what capabilities we require to protect those interests in that environment; what equipment programmes we require; and, then, to assess our budgetary capabilities? We need to bring logic and empiricism to what is currently a chaotic process.

Nick Harvey: I entirely agree with all that. If at the end of the process, which we should approach in exactly that way, we still find a gap between what we sincerely want to do and what we believe we are capable of assuming the resources to do, we will have to consider how we can best co-operate with our allies, particularly in NATO, to ensure that the resources that we can make available dovetail as effectively as possible. In that way, even if we are not capable of doing on the very widest front all the things that we want to do alone, we will at least be capable of ensuring that they can be done in co-operation with our allies. Better collective planning with our allies would enable that, but an absolute prerequisite is a systematic, evidence-based and empirical approach to a review, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

I cannot understand why the Government continue to resist. This side of an election, I would have thought that at the very least there would be some benefit in both sides of the House agreeing the sort of questions that need to be asked and the sort of approach that might be taken, even if in reality the work of the review would not begin in earnest until the other side of the election.

Huge procurement projects are sitting—notionally, at least—on the Government's books. We are waiting for answers, but the Government cannot make decisions about the projects because of the economic circumstances. It is not always possible to identify precisely what the dilemmas are, for reasons to which the hon. Gentleman has alluded in the House before. I am thinking of this country's deficit in terms of the transparency of our procurement processes compared with those in many other western democracies, where national legislatures can scrutinise in far more detail the procurement decisions and dilemmas faced by the Governments in question. We do ourselves no good service in this country through the opaque way in which we go about many of these things.

I have repeatedly urged that we need a new approach to procurement, because, more than anything else in the defence field, it has not been a success in recent decades. One can point to the egregious examples of procurement mishaps, but our procurement processes are not adequate right across the piece. We have to start them again from scratch. In respect of procurement and of maintaining strategic defence industries, we need to look more effectively at how we co-operate best with our natural allies.

There have been some terrible co-operative procurements, but that does not mean that we should be put off the idea altogether. I abhor the approach that has looked at European defence procurements and then got into the realms of pork barrel politics by divvying up the work through the absurd notion of juste retour. The defence industries are well ahead of the political community in having already organised themselves along international lines; very few of the companies are national—they are all transnational, multinational and international. National Governments have some way to go in catching up with and taking advantage of that.

The hon. Gentleman rightly alluded to the renewed threats presented by the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran. If either country goes ahead with its nuclear programmes, in the wake of international condemnation and in breach of the existing treaties, that will inevitably trigger proliferation among their neighbouring states. I welcome the efforts by French President Sarkozy to try to re-engage Iran in a new dialogue about its nuclear ambitions. I regret that the progress that seemed to be being made with North

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Korea appears to have gone into reverse gear. Next year, we have the nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference. I hope that the new dialogue that appears to exist between President Obama and Russia is capable of giving some renewed impetus to the course of nuclear disarmament. However, the good news that one might detect in their rapprochement has to be balanced against the more worrying news in North Korea and Iran.

Some very tough decisions need to be taken in the defence arena, and I do not believe there is any realistic chance of that happening this side of an election. Those decisions should not be kept waiting for too much longer. For that reason, I share the wish of others to see an election as soon as possible so that a new Government have the authority to take some of these difficult decisions because, whatever the final conclusions, they will have an opportunity cost. I hope that the dedication of our armed forces, who are fighting in many different parts of the world on our behalf, will be matched by a determination in the Ministry of Defence to resolve some of the issues that have been awaiting decisions for far too long.

We are very well served by our armed forces personnel, and there is some way to go yet before we really do justice to the work that they are putting in on our behalf around the world by ensuring that we sort out our priorities and equip them with everything that they need to guarantee their safety and the success of the operations in which they are engaged.

3.32 pm

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) (Con): I want to begin, if I may, by saying that this debate is an absolute disgrace. It is quite wrong that an issue of such crucial importance is always debated before an empty House. We have to find a way of bringing out the debate in such a way as to capture the imagination of the people of this country and, frankly, of this Parliament. At the moment, we are talking to an empty Public Gallery, an empty Press Gallery and an empty Chamber. None of the important things that we will say about this vital subject, which is central to the survival of this country, to our values, and to democracies across the world will be listened to at all. We might as well not be here.

Having said that, I still have one or two things that I might as well say. When we had a similar debate this time last year, we would have been reminding ourselves that Basra had been completely transformed as a result of the "Charge of the Knights". We would have looked at Iraq and thought, much to our surprise in many ways, that things had gone much better than we might have expected. We should all share in the tribute paid to our armed forces for the immense things that they achieved in Iraq and for the massive sacrifices that they made. We express our thanks to them for that.

I was always more optimistic about what we could achieve in Iraq than about what we could achieve in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, we have had the benefit of operating in a larger coalition. Coalitions bring strength, but they also bring weaknesses and difficulties. The weakness is a lack of coherence and a risk of international suspicions and resentments. There is a real risk that some of the problems of Afghanistan will always be thought to be somebody else's problem. We are operating in a coalition there, and we cannot achieve everything that we want to because we do not have the final say. Partly because of that, we are failing as an international coalition to recognise the enormous size of the task that we are facing.

In the Balkans, we put 20 times as many troops and 50 times as much resource into a problem that was rather easier to solve. In Afghanistan, the key task that we face is bringing governance to a country that, frankly, has not had it in the past. We have as our secondary task the destruction of the crop that is the main livelihood of much of the country, which is a rather challenging task in itself. The tools that we have to achieve those two tasks are the Afghans themselves, who are wonderful people but do not really like being told what to do by foreigners.

The Select Committee on Defence is about to begin an inquiry into the comprehensive approach. It is a great honour to chair that Committee, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) for her contribution, recent as it has been. I can assure her that is hugely valued. We are lucky to have a dedicated group of members and a wonderful support staff who ensure that our inquiries are as productive as they can be.

The questions about the comprehensive approach are difficult to answer. Are we tying the development of new livelihoods in with the security that our forces bring? For example, will the road network be kept secure from improvised explosive devices so that people can get their produce to market? Will it be kept secure from roadblocks, sometimes police roadblocks, where protection money is demanded despite a tiny margin of profit? That is the sort of thing that local people in Afghanistan worry about. All those issues have to be dealt with in a country that has little education, mountainous terrain, no secure infrastructure, no policeable borders and no natural resources. It is awash with weapons, most of them provided by us. The task is a large one to face.

Dr. Fox: I hope that one of the most important issues that the Defence Committee will examine is Britain's ability to carry out construction in a conflict environment. It seems to me that until we are able to develop that capability, there will be a major gap in our ability to deal with conflicts such as Afghanistan should they arise in any other part of the world.

Mr. Arbuthnot: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who has put his finger on a most important point. That is one of the matters on which we will concentrate heavily in our inquiry into the comprehensive approach, and I am grateful to him for making that point. I believe that it was my hon. Friend who said that local government in Helmand is making good progress under Governor Mangal, who I agree is an extremely effective governor, but it is good progress from an extremely low base.

Obviously we cannot talk about Afghanistan without considering Pakistan, just next door. Pakistan, of course, is a nuclear power and has already contributed dramatically to the proliferation of nuclear power through the operations of A. Q. Khan. The dangers of some of its nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the Taliban or al-Qaeda

are huge. The close links and instant communication between this country and Pakistan mean that threats there are immediately threats here.

Pakistan's economy is in trouble in the global recession, so it is unlikely to be able to contain the insurgency there without our help. Yet there is no prospect of foreign troops being allowed into Pakistan to help it do so. As I said in an intervention on the Secretary of State, all that is not made easier by the fact that Pakistan spends only 2 per cent. of its gross domestic product on education, which leaves such a huge void for the madrassahs to fill and provides an opportunity for people to be influenced by insurgents and radicals from an early age.

The instability in the region means that it has taken over from Israel as the most insecure area of the world. It must therefore be the first priority of not only this country but of our allies. We must begin the huge task of explaining the importance of all that to our allies, because we are not strong enough to cope with helping Pakistan alone. Even with the help of the United States, we are not strong enough. We need the support of our European allies above all, so we must do a lot of diplomatic work.

Next door is Iran. When the President of Iran talked about wiping Israel off the face of the map, he was not joking; he firmly believes it. The support for terrorism in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon and elsewhere has become a hallmark of Iran's foreign policy. Iran is a threat to all its neighbours, which they recognise perhaps better than many European countries, which have provided such divided and weak responses to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Mrs. Moon: The right hon. Gentleman talked about the importance of engaging with not only our American but our European allies on Pakistan, and the difficulties that we all face because of attitudes emanating from Iran. Does he agree that, in using our diplomacy, it is crucial to talk to other Muslim leaders so that what is right for Pakistan does not become a western Christian view but a world view of the changes that are needed?

Mr. Arbuthnot: I entirely agree. I pay tribute to President Obama for his speech today in Egypt, in which he said—very effectively—that America is not at war with Islam and never will be. Islam is not the problem; it is a great religion, which we all respect enormously.

Next door to Iran is Russia—a wonderful country which is led by a small Government of little democratic validity. It is capable of putting a stranglehold on energy for the rest of the world, and it appears to be establishing mechanisms to achieve that. It is willing to bully its former Soviet neighbours with lethal and disproportionate force, and its motivation appears to be gaining self-respect. That is not the best way to go about achieving that. If Russia could bring itself firmly within the community of nations, and work for the good of the world—as the hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) said that we as a country should do—its self-respect would return in much shorter order.

Dr. Fox: My right hon. Friend is a respected and long-serving Member, who has also served in government. From his experience, why does he think that western Governments are making so little comment about the continuing Russian presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Are we simply afraid of upsetting Russia, or is the subject of little importance or interest to western nations?

Mr. Arbuthnot: I think that there are a lot of reasons for that. I suspect that one of the reasons is that western Governments are not spending enough on defence, so they do not know what else they could do. They do not know whether they could back up any words about Russia with actions. That is a serious worry about our western allies as a whole, but it is also a serious worry about this country, although I will come to that in just a moment.

Next door to Russia is China, which has its pressures of population and an urban-rural divide. Incidentally, if we are looking ahead to problems of defence in the world, a real cause of instability in the future may be the vast empty lands of eastern Russia right next door to the heavily over-populated areas of China, particularly given that those areas of eastern Russia have such huge natural resources. I suspect that Russia is looking ahead with apprehension to what might happen there. We should begin to form a view on what effect that sort of issue might have on the western world.

China is growing strongly. It owns a huge amount of United States debt. The Chinese are investing in education in a way that will be very effective for their country. They take a long-term view—perhaps a longer-term view than the western world takes—and we cannot ignore their phenomenal rise, because it will have defence implications. All those things are things that we can look at in deciding what we ought to be thinking about in respect of defence in the world.

Mrs. Moon: I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman a second time, but he is talking about an area that is of interest to me, particularly in respect of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation and its implications for the northern border to which he has referred, and China's attitude towards the other powers in the region. China's stance under the terms of the agreement, which is about non-interference, is that neither it nor any other member of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation—Russia is a signatory, while Pakistan and India have observer status—will try to impose values on other states, which is something that they see the west as doing. However, those states will agree to combine to protect each other's independence and integrity. Is that new force not something that we should be aware of, and is it not a risk to our ways of working?

Mr. Arbuthnot: That is the current Chinese attitude. I suspect that as China's requirements for more and more resources grow, in order to satisfy a growing middle class in China, the Chinese will begin to need to make more inroads into other countries, not just in that region, but in places such as Africa. The issue that the hon. Lady raises is certainly something of which we need to be strongly aware. I know that she has expressed an interest in it on the Defence Committee, and I hope that she will continue to do so, because it is a matter of great importance.

So far I have been talking about things that we are able to see already. Ten years ago we would not have been able to foresee any of them—except, perhaps, those to do with China. What will be happening in 10 years' time that we cannot now foresee? Are we

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prepared now to have a defence budget and a defence stance that will be completely unable to cope with the unforeseen in 10 years' time?

I believe that defence is at a watershed. There are fundamental structural flaws in the Ministry of Defence, at a time when the Army is down to fewer than 100,000 and people are no longer sure what equipment can be bought. There are huge internal battles for survival, for supremacy and for equipment between the different services, and with the civil service. There appears to be no cohesive view to show to the world, or even internally, within the Ministry of Defence. There is a budget that has been weakened over decades by war and by underfunding.

At the end of the cold war, we saw two changes. First, nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction stopped being as effective as they had previously been, so we should then have spent more, not less, on conventional arms. Secondly, the world became less stable, rather than more stable. Again, we should therefore have spent more, rather than less. *[Interruption.]* I will give way to the Minister if he wants to intervene. No, he does not. So, we took the peace dividend, and that was a serious mistake. If the Minister is hinting, by his gestures from a sedentary position, that it was the Conservatives who took that peace dividend, I can assure him that we were whipped on by the Labour party every step of the way. Everybody in the western world was saying, "Thank heavens, we can spend less on equipment," and it was the Labour party that went into the 1997 election promising to reduce spending on defence to the European average.

It was a dreadful mistake to take the peace dividend. The result is that there is now a black hole in the defence budget. Things have been made worse recently by the knowledge that there is to be no bad news coming out of defence, and no new money going into defence. A lot of the defence decisions that should have been taken last year or the year before have therefore been postponed until just after the general election. When the pigeons come home to roost, they will discover that there is no roost to come home to.

There is a strategy in the Ministry of Defence that relies very heavily on the power of new equipment but ignores the quality that comes from quantity. The manpower of the armed forces has therefore been reduced to a level that is close to unsustainable. The hon. Member for North Devon talked about helicopters. The helicopters are going to become much more powerful, but there will be so few of them that they will not be able to be anywhere.

Bob Russell: The right hon. Gentleman said that the size of the Army was about 100,000. Is it his understanding that approximately 10 per cent. are from overseas? Does he agree that there is a need to recruit more from the United Kingdom if we are not to become increasingly dependent on overseas members of the Army?

Mr. Arbuthnot: I think that the figure is 9 per cent., but, yes, I believe that it is necessary to have larger armed forces. I am just about to talk about money, but where is the money to come from for that? This is a serious issue that the country—not just the Government, the Opposition and politicians—has to face.

We are relying heavily on more and more powerful equipment, but we are still losing the capacity to act alongside our closest ally, the United States. We have dwindling armed forces and a tiny reserve, and all of this means that there is less and less connection with the people whom the armed forces are protecting, because they do not meet them on a regular basis. I am afraid that the review of the reserve forces appears to be managing the decline of the armed forces rather than inspiring their rebirth. We have a public who do not understand the armed forces or what they are doing, and who therefore do not support defence spending. As a result, there is no money to spend on defence. We have spent the money, for decades ahead, on the banks.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: My right hon. Friend suggests that the public may not be as supportive of the armed forces as they once were, but I would like him to reflect further on that. The common wisdom has been that the public will not support increased expenditure because they do not understand the armed forces, but I put it to my right hon. Friend that we have seen a quite astonishing wave of outpourings from people recently—and not just in Wootton Bassett, where the reception of our fallen heroes was particularly dignified, but right across the land. Perhaps we politicians—and, indeed, military commanders—are in danger of misunderstanding the public mood.

Mr. Arbuthnot: I desperately hope that my hon. Friend is right. I feel that if the public are asked whether they think the armed forces are being treated unfairly, they will reply with a resounding yes, but if they are asked whether they want funding for the new ward in their local hospital to be cut in order to provide more for the armed forces, I suspect that they will be much less certain in their answer. I believe that we have to take the argument over this question out to the public, because they need to understand the issues the country is facing.

When it comes to the current team of Defence Ministers—it is an excellent team, incidentally—I have a suspicion, although none of them have told me so, that they are desperately hoping that they lose the next election because some of the decisions that they would otherwise have to take would, largely because of the lack of money, be so awful. They know that we are in deep trouble.

Mr. Jenkin: Staying with the theme of the public's attitude towards defence spending, we in the House of Commons should have learned in recent weeks how neglecting an issue can engulf us in public rage. Neglect of this particular issue may be fine in peacetime and when we are deploying our troops in faraway and little-understood battles, but if we require our armed forces to do something at short notice that they are not capable of doing and it results in disaster, we need to be aware that the wrath of the British people over our neglect will be unimaginable—and we will deserve it.

Mr. Arbuthnot: My hon. Friend is quite right, which is why conducting this debate on this particular day is such a disgrace. It is excellent when Defence Ministers regularly go out to places such as Afghanistan and know what they are talking about—but I cannot remember

the last time a Treasury Minister went out to Afghanistan. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten me about that, but I suspect that he probably will not.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): The right hon. Gentleman makes some important points, which we should all be prepared to address. Let me first reassure him, however, that no matter what the difficulties in future, I would far rather take the decisions myself than have him or his colleagues taking them; he should be under no illusions whatever about that. What he appears to be saying—I think with a degree of honesty—is that despite the fact that he deprecates the situation we are in, his own party, too, would have to cut defence capability. *[Interruption.]* That is effectively what he said. If he is not saying that, will he tell us, in the honest and open way in which he speaks in these debates, what he believes will be in all the parties' manifestos at the coming general election—no matter how near or far away it is—and, in particular, whether his party is likely to pledge to improve defence spending over and above what the Government have pledged?

Mr. Arbuthnot: I did not say that my party would cut defence. Frankly, however, I very much doubt that there will be much difference between the defence spending plans in the Labour manifesto and those in the Conservative manifesto. What I have always tried to do as Chairman of the Defence Select Committee is to tell the people of this country that they need to realise how important defence spending is, and that they should put pressure on both the Chancellor and shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, and on all of us, to change our approach to defence spending, because the whole country needs it.

It is essential that we change, because our defence spending is down to about 2 per cent.. of GDP—the lowest since the 1930s. That is leading to disrespect. The people of this country have not discussed that or considered the problem that is about to hit them, which will hit them whoever wins the next election. The issue is not whether we remain a first-order power, but whether we become a second-order or a third-order power. In other words, will we be able to operate alongside France, or will we be limited to operating alongside Belgium and Italy?

The public, I hope, will have a view on that, but only if they are asked. For that reason, I strongly believe that we need a strategic defence review. One thing that we need to consider is research and technology. I shall quote a paragraph:

> "A recent MOD sponsored study analysing 11 major defence capable nations has uncovered a highly significant correlation between equipment capability and R&T investment in the last 5-30 years... It shows that there is a simple 'you get what you pay for' relationship between R&T spend and equipment quality, with a sharp law of diminishing returns, and that R&T investment buys a time advantage over open market equipment."

That paragraph was written by the Government in the defence industrial strategy, so what is the Ministry of Defence doing about this? Astonishingly, it is cutting its research and technology budget by 7 per cent. this year, and it looks as though that is to continue over the next few years.

The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who has responsibility for defence equipment and support, tells us that that is a simple matter of priorities. He is right; it is—and he has the wrong priorities. Our ability to respond quickly and effectively to emerging threats is built on the knowledge base, which is itself built on sustained investment in research and development since the 1980s. He might say that he wants industry to do more of the research. It is doing that. In 2006-07, according to the Society of British Aerospace Companies, the defence sector invested £3.34 billion in research and development, which was about 40 per cent. of the EU's and 15 per cent. of the UK's research and development spend. However, this country's defence industry needs some customers, which means the Ministry of Defence.

After that catalogue of despair there is some hope, which comes from two sources. The first source of that hope is the men and women of our armed forces. Long, long ago as a Defence Minister, I was awed by the strength of purpose of our armed forces—their determination, honesty, courage, humility and intellectual ability, which I was not necessarily expecting when I went into the Ministry, but it was certainly there. They were wonderful men and women, and so were the civil servants who supported them. As Chairman of the Defence Committee, I have had that confirmed every time I have met them. We have some outstanding people; I just do not think that we are making the best use of them.

The second source of hope is the resilience and determination of the people of this country. When they are given the right information and things are properly explained, they make the right choices.

I shall end on the point that we need a strategic defence review in the full public gaze. We are getting a non-strategic defence review in the secrecy of the Ministry of Defence. That will not do the trick. First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) so rightly said, we need to work out what defence is for. What do we need to defend? Secondly, we need to reform the Ministry of Defence so that it becomes coherent, cohesive, functional, straightforward and directed.

My hon. Friend correctly said that we need to reform the defence acquisition process, and I was delighted with the Secretary of State's comments about Bernard Gray's inquiry, about which I have heard good things. We need to put into the job of defence acquisition people who are intrinsically good at it, rather than those who do it because a gap has opened up for the next two years. We need to ensure that those who are best at the job carry on doing it rather than getting moved on quickly. We need a defence acquisition process led by capability rather than by programmes. We need to force the armed forces to make choices between what they want to be able to do, instead of piling up ever more unrealistic shopping lists, egged on by the defence industry, and unrestrained by any functioning process in the Ministry of Defence.

Finally, we need to tell the people about the importance of what the Ministry of Defence does. We need to tie it in with our national interests and explain why it is important to the people. This is a defence-oriented nation. If there is a war, we are more than likely to be involved in it. This country does not want to be an also-ran nation. We have interests all round the world, which we want to protect, and citizens at home and abroad whom we must defend. That, after all, is what Government is for.

4.6 pm

Ann Winterton (Congleton) (Con): On the day when this debate was announced, I asked the Leader of the House at business questions whether, in a week when four young soldiers had been killed in Afghanistan, it was a good idea to hold such a debate on the day of local and European elections. She said that the reason for it being held on that day was that there would be no vote. There are no votes on most Thursdays because of the ridiculous modernisation programme the House has undertaken in recent years, and I suggest that it is an insult to our armed services that the debate is being held today.

Notwithstanding that, the debate has been excellent, and I am sure that, after my contribution, it will continue to be so. Before I move on to the main part of my speech, I want to pick up one or two issues. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon), who, sadly, has just left the Chamber, said that as a history teacher she taught that since the second world war the peace had been kept by the European Union. That is absolute stuff and nonsense. The peace has been kept by NATO, and we should remember that.

I also want to cross swords with the hon. Lady, and the Secretary of State, on co-operation and further integration in defence policy and acquisition through the European Union. I remind the House that one of the reasons why we have a shortage of airlift capacity is that the A400M aircraft was commissioned, if that is the right word, in the days of the Government led by John Major. It was due to be delivered in 2007, in the light of which the order for Hercules J aircraft was diminished. Therefore, our lack of airlift capacity is because of the European Union's incompetence in co-operating to fulfil its obligations. The Minister for the Armed Forces is shaking his head—

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: Frowning.

Ann Winterton: Well, both are equally bad; I would much prefer that he was cheerful. *[Interruption.]* He is smiling now, and that is good.

I listened to the Secretary of State with a great deal of interest. He made some interesting points, other than that which I just referred to, which chime in many ways with other things happening in defence. The recent Whit recess gave me a welcome opportunity to read the speech made at Chatham House on 15 May by the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, entitled, "A Perspective on the Nature of Future Conflict." Some very important issues were raised in that speech, which I believe are worthy of further debate—especially as the supertanker of United Kingdom defence policy is slowly changing course, although not as fast as the Americans are changing policy and adapting to the realities of present conflicts.

Let me quote a paragraph of General Dannatt's speech. He said:

"The first point of consensus, as the National Security Strategy sets out, is that, 'for the foreseeable future, no state or alliance will have both the intent and the capability to threaten the United Kingdom militarily, either with nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, or with conventional forces'. Self-evidently this statement has profound implications for Armed Forces that are still largely equipped, trained and structured for a particular view of conventional state on state warfighting—and particularly so, when the threat spectrum is both more complex and demanding. It is difficult not to conclude that our focus on preparing and equipping for a particular type of conventional state threat has left us unbalanced. Our enemies have adapted. So must we."

The question that I pose to the House this afternoon is "Have we, and will we?"

The House will have to forgive me if I stick to my last, but before I do so, let me observe that what General Sir Richard Dannatt was saying was more or less what the Secretary of State was saying. The campaigns in which we are currently having to be involved are connected with what I call "next-war-itis". They are predominantly concerned with counter-insurgency and reconstruction. Perhaps the changes that may be coming will feed through to quicker, smoother and more effective procurement which will support the needs of troops on the ground.

We began badly in Iraq with the Warrior, which had no air conditioning and was hardly ideal for conditions of heat and humidity. Then the Snatch Land Rover was to be replaced by 166 disastrous Vector Pinzgauers. The Vectors were initially highly praised in many quarters, but I believe that those who have been injured or have died in them have been failed by the media, the parliamentary scrutiny system and indeed the Army itself. It is no good the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), saying, as he did during defence questions on Monday,

"Its problem has been its 'operationability'".—[*Official Report*, 1 June 2009; Vol. 493, c. 10.]

I assume that he meant that it did not live up to expectations, but—with due deference to the Minister—we knew that before the Vector was deployed, and in my view it should never have been deployed at all.

I suggest to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, that he and the members of his Committee should consider an inquiry into the issue. I think that what has happened is a national disgrace—not just the cost, but the loss of life in particular.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: As my hon. Friend knows, I saw the Vector before it was unveiled. I happened to be driving the ordinary Pinzgauer. One of the questions that I asked at the time was whether the new armour being added to the vehicle required a strengthening of the suspension. I was told that that was not necessary.

My hon. Friend has done a tremendous job in fighting battles on behalf of our soldiers who have not been provided with adequate equipment. May I ask her a question that I asked the Minister on Monday, when he failed to answer it? What sort of evaluation process does the Ministry of Defence have, given that the Vector was passed by a technical evaluation? We are not technical people in the House, and we must rely on technical people in the Ministry of Defence, but it appears that that is where the failure occurred. Has my hon. Friend a view on that?

Ann Winterton: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I was once given a briefing at the MOD when I argued with a young gentleman about the Vector Pinzgauers. I said to him that bearing in mind both that the driver was right over the wheel and also the plain, ordinary physics of how bombs explode and where deflections

go, it would be a death-trap, and it has proved to be so. I have stated the following many times in this House, and I will state it again on later occasions, because in politics we sometimes have to keep on repeating and repeating before finally, it is to be hoped, someone takes up the point being made: the design of vehicles is vital to saving the lives of the people in them. Unless that point is grasped within the MOD, we are whistling in the wind.

The Snatch Land Rover has now been upgraded to the Vixen and more than 200 Huskys have been procured at a cost of just under £600,000 each. They will prove to be another failure, replacing an earlier failure. The Americans rejected this vehicle as it sustained a hull breach on the mine resistant ambush protected—MRAP—level I standard test.

The 401 Panther command and liaison vehicles, which cost a cool £413,000 each, have taken longer than the duration of world war two to bring into service, with constant upgrades. They are in every way an expensive and inferior vehicle and were originally capable of NATO standard mine protection STANAG 4569 level 2a, which roughly translated means that they have protection against 6 kg of explosive, but they will be put into operation where 7.5 kg Russian mines are prevalent. Will the Minister please confirm in his winding-up speech whether the latest £20 million upgrade has taken protection up to level 3a and 3b, and if he cannot do that today, will he please drop me a note?

When the procurement of the Jackal—or M-WMIK, as it was initially known—was announced, it was agreed that it would be good for special forces. Too much emphasis, however, was placed on the David Stirling, world war two concept when equipment acted as the predator, whereas the Jackal, by being used for general duties, has now become the prey. I remember a discussion on Radio 1 in which a young Territorial Army private infantry soldier who had just returned from Iraq took on a sergeant who was extolling the Jackal's brilliance by explaining the faults with the vehicle. What listeners were not aware of was that the TA private soldier was in civilian life an engineer working in force deflection, and in the TA he was a "pioneer" dealing with explosives. The 200 Jackals in service, and a further 110 Jackal 2s, have again highlighted the failed concept of bolting on armour, as proved by the American Humvee vehicle. Can the Minister confirm how many Jackals have been lost, because some reports suggest the number is as high as 20 per cent. of those deployed in Afghanistan?

The whole protected vehicle fleet is, in General Dannatt's word, unbalanced, because if we add to the vehicles that I have previously listed the Coyote, Viking, Tellar and Warthog, then compared with the 306 Mastiffs, 157 Ridgebacks, 90 Wolfhounds and 24 Bushmasters, blast-absorption vehicles with added armour vastly outnumber blast-deflection vehicles which have their defence built into the original design of the distinctive V-shaped hull.

Mr. Bob Ainsworth: I know that the hon. Lady studies this issue and always tries to bring some thought to it, but she must accept that we cannot put all our people into the same kind of vehicles. We have to give them a range of different vehicles of different sizes. We have to try to mitigate the effect of using a smaller vehicle, and that can be done only to a degree. The main protection of the Jackal is its massive manoeuvrability; it does not have to go down the well-trodden path. If the hon. Lady goes to theatre, she will know that it is a very well thought of vehicle among all ranks.

Ann Winterton: It may be very well thought of by some, but I would not like to hazard a guess as to how many young men have been killed in it unnecessarily. I will leave the subject there and move on, unless the Minister wants me to give way again.

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Lady is suggesting that there is some easy alternative that would give our people the capability that they need to do the job and yet remove if not the entire risk, a lot of the risk associated with the Jackal. I do not believe that she is correct.

Ann Winterton: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman does not think I was born yesterday. War is bloody and people get killed in it, but what is desperate is the fact that this country has not supported its soldiers in conflict with the right kind of vehicles, which can be obtained, and has instead made major mistakes in procurement. He and I are not going to agree on this subject, so I should move on because I have made my point and we have had our disagreement.

Blast absorption vehicles are not cheaper, and when they encounter an explosion not only are the occupants killed or maimed, but the vehicle is a write-off. Compare that with the record of the Mastiff: only one early version was lost due to a fire, and although there have been injuries sustained in explosions, nobody has yet been killed. *[Interruption.]* I shall come to something else in a minute—I am making a point now. The *Oxford Mail* reported last Tuesday that four local soldiers—I believe that they are from Bicester—escaped injury when their Mastiff hit a mine. One of them, Captain Fletcher, was quoted as saying that the Mastiff afforded great mobility across the desert terrain of Afghanistan and, despite its weight and size, afforded unrivalled protection. The vehicle was able to drive away after the explosion under its own power—compare that with the fate of the two soldiers killed recently in a Jackal in the very same area.

Mr. Ainsworth *rose—*

Ann Winterton: May I continue? Again on Monday, the Minister with responsibility for defence equipment and support, who has returned to his place, praised the Coyote and the Husky, which is likely to be another useless and death-threatening procurement. However, he was right about the Wolfhound, which should prove to be good news. I find it so distressing to hear lavish praise being heaped upon the procurement of vehicles that are potential death-traps and to listen later to expressions of condolence to the families of those who have perished in them.

Just as the Buffalo was originally condemned by the MOD but is now being purchased, I hope that the Department will look again at the new version of the Cheetah, which has been developed by Force Protection and was recently shown to members of Congress on Capitol Hill. I fully support the efforts of South Carolina Congressman Henry E. Brown to promote this MRAP vehicle to ensure that both British and American soldiers

[Ann Winterton]

are properly protected. I am also convinced—Ministers might be interested in this—that Force Protection vehicles could be turned into successful half-tracks if greater manoeuvrability was required.

The Secretary of State is quoted in this month's *Soldier* magazine as praising the new American military direction, which includes the cancellation of their equivalent of the future rapid effect system—FRES—project and suggests that we need a similar readjustment in the UK. Perhaps the UK has accepted that concept in principle, but it certainly has not yet done so in practice.

I will end by quoting again from General Dannatt's speech at Chatham House. He said:

"We must ensure we do enough to succeed and simply not enough to fail".

Although I am delighted that General Dannatt has changed his views since he took office, the danger is still that we are not changing fast enough—not just in terms of vehicle procurement, but in many other areas. When we talk about the budget today and future budgets, I would remind the House of the amount of money that has been wasted on equipment and vehicles that have not been fit for purpose. If those disastrous decisions had not been made, more resources would be available to spend on what the soldiers fighting in Afghanistan need now.

4.25 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I concur with the remarks that have been made so far on the timing of today's debate on the day of the European and local elections. I am sure that the Ministers would agree, if they were allowed to say so. There is nothing to add to the chorus of condemnation of that choice.

However, it is two days until the anniversary of the 65th anniversary of D-day and that is another reason why I have chosen to speak in this debate. I am proud that my uncle, Major-General Tony Richardson, is president of the Normandy Veterans Association. I am delighted that the Prince of Wales will attend the celebrations. The issue was sadly mishandled and the Ministry of Defence failed to appreciate the importance of the 65th anniversary. Given the presence of President Obama, it would have been better if Her Majesty the Queen were to attend, but at least the Prince of Wales is going.

I am also delighted that my uncle had the opportunity to take his grandson, Captain Max Ferguson of the US army, to visit the beaches a week or so ago. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon), who is no longer in her place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) attended a presentation by Captain Ferguson, my cousin and godson on his 15 months in Iraq as an infantry platoon commander, commanding a troop of Stryker vehicles and some 40 soldiers—

Ann Winterton: I attended too.

Mr. Blunt: Indeed, and I listened with interest to my hon. Friend's remarks about military vehicles. I commend her campaign and the attention she has given to the issue. It is right that Ministers should be put on the spot for the decisions that they have to make, although I acknowledge the difficulty of those decisions and the trade-offs that have to be made. It is important that we have hon. Members willing to dig down into the detail and track procurement decisions. My hon. Friend has done a signal service in holding Ministers to account on the issue, and that is how Parliament should work.

My cousin, Captain Ferguson, was ambushed when riding in a Stryker vehicle. It is well regarded by the US army, but that did not stop him being nearly killed when it was hit in Baghdad. One of the soldiers in the vehicle was killed and the young soldier sitting next to him was badly wounded. My cousin was lucky enough to survive and the vehicle was able to drive away from the ambush.

My cousin's presentation was a remarkable story of 15 months in Iraq, in 2007-08, from a platoon commander in the US army. It was particularly instructive to hear how much of the US concept of operations in Iraq had become more like the British one—in terms of hearts and minds, and living alongside the community in which they were operating in order to draw intelligence from it and take the fight to the terrorists. One can only reflect on that change and what happened to the British forces in Basra—there was almost an inversion of roles over the last six years.

Rather more sombrely, and again involving what I would regard as my family—my former regimental family—on Saturday, Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett became the first fatality of the Light Dragoons in operations in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The regimental family of a regiment the size of the Light Dragoons is quite small. There are only about 400 or so serving in the regiment at any one time, and that fatality brings home the pain and pride in the sacrifice made by Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett.

I did not know Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett. I left the regiment a rather long time ago now and he joined it in 2003. In reading the tributes paid to him by his commanders, his contemporaries and his father, one is struck by and able to visualise the sort of character that this young man was. I want to take this opportunity to draw on those tributes and to try to give the House the sense of the sort of young men and women who are serving our country on operations today. His squadron sergeant-major, of C Squadron, the Light Dragoons, Sergeant-Major David Rae, said in tribute:

"My first memory of Moff was of a young lad about to learn his trade in Bovington. Even at an early age he was not convinced his aspirations would be met in the regiment he was allocated; instead he wanted to serve as a reconnaissance soldier.

I would see him daily with a 50lb...pack on running the training areas to become fitter and stronger than those around him. I enquired as to why he was training so hard whilst others were enjoying the freedom gained from leaving Basic Training, his answer was simple, 'I want to be a 'recce' soldier and I need to convince them I am going to be one'. These words and his dedication had me wishing if only every young man had this zest for soldiering and this commitment to their chosen career. He was granted his wish and joined The Light Dragoons.

Again we crossed paths when I assumed my position as Squadron Sergeant Major. Moff was more experienced having been on tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and unbelievably, fitter and stronger than when we first met. He was the Squadron Physical Training Instructor, and to a man, we all paraded under him for PT with more than a little apprehension of how we would fair under his 'training'.

Moff took no prisoners and never eased off, regardless of how hard people were blowing and regardless of what rank they were. The Legion"—

that was the nickname of C Squadron the 13th/18th Royal Hussars when I was in it, and is now the nickname of C Squadron, the Light Dragoons—

"expected nothing less than a professional approach from him and we all benefited hugely from his expertise."

His commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Gus Fair, who has a special forces background, said:

"He relished his role as a Physical Training Instructor and was always the first to volunteer for a course or adventurous training. His dedication, fitness and sheer enjoyment of his work marked him out as a star of the future and a role model to the junior soldiers.

He died at the top of his game and showed all the potential of realising his ambition of serving as a badged member of UK Special Forces."

However, it is his father's tribute that is the most moving:

"Nigel felt he was prepared for operations in that he was well trained and had the right tools for the job. Both he and his family understood that ultimately he could die although we didn't want this to happen. Ultimately, Nigel was a soldier."

This week, we have had almost a fatality a day. The fact that Lance Corporal Nigel Moffett has as part of his regimental family someone who has ended up in the House of Commons is purely a coincidence, but the tributes paid apply to all the soldiers who have died over the past week and the perhaps more than 300 soldiers—I do not know the numbers—who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan serving our country since 2003. We should also not forget that for every fatality that we mark at Prime Minister's questions by naming these soldiers—now, seemingly, every Wednesday—rather more seriously wounded soldiers are coming back from theatre whose lives will be completely dominated by the experience that they have suffered serving our country.

Of course, in addition to that, we are seeing just the tip of the iceberg, in terms of the psychological consequences for soldiers who are taking part in operations of an intensity perhaps unseen in large parts of the second world war, despite their coming from a country that is effectively at peace. We, as a country, obviously have to pay our debt and make sure that soldiers who have been wounded seriously, physically and psychologically, are supported properly.

We also owe the soldiers who are serving us something else. I shall now make, as gently as I can, a rather serious political point. The Americans are seriously reconsidering their strategy in Afghanistan. That has important implications for how we conduct our operations in Helmand province. Our forces in Helmand province are being joined by a large number of US forces as we speak. Sadly, whatever the merits and capabilities of Defence Ministers, we have a Government and a Parliament that have lost their authority, and there is now a serious requirement. If we are to discharge our debt to soldiers who are fighting and dying for our country, we must regain the authority of the Government and the Parliament that those soldiers serve. In the circumstances, that can be done only by the people giving a new mandate to a new Parliament and Government. I hope that Ministers and people more widely will reflect on the fact that right now, we in Government and Parliament are not giving the quality of leadership that we should give to those men and women serving on our behalf.

The speech made by the shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), and the speech with which the Secretary of State opened the debate contained important reflections on the conduct of our operations in Afghanistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be taken separately. At the strategic level, they must be dealt with together. There are obviously particular problems about our ability and capacity to give direct help in Pakistan, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, made clear. However, in a sense, and in strategic terms, Pakistan is a much more important entity than Afghanistan. The threat from Pakistan's weapons of mass destruction, the size of its population, and the size of the British Pakistani population—given that I am shadow Minister with responsibility for counter-terrorism, I am only too aware of the domestic issues in that regard—mean that Pakistan is much more important than Afghanistan, but they are very much linked.

On Afghanistan, I want to reinforce what my hon. Friend said about localism; he referred to the provincialisation of policy there. That is extremely important. Due to issues of geography and ethnicity in Afghanistan, a central authority has always struggled to exercise authority in a comprehensive way over the whole country, and if that is the model that we are trying to follow, we simply will not succeed. It would appear that we are learning, albeit all too slowly, about the methods that will achieve our objectives. Last year I was lucky enough to see the young officer cadets of the Afghan national army being trained by British forces in Kabul. As has been said in this debate, the training and mentoring—effectively the creation—of that army is gradually emerging as an important success.

Of course, that sits alongside the catastrophic failure of the training and development of the Afghan national police. It is the Afghan national police with whom the average Afghan is in contact daily. Certainly when I was in Afghanistan a year ago, their corruption, criminality, ineffectiveness, inefficiency and the rest appeared to be making a more negative than positive contribution to our potential success in the conflict. I was struck by the parallel that my hon. Friend drew with the Charge of the Knights operation, and there does appear to be a parallel, given the Americans' entry into the southern part of Helmand province and the Prime Minister's indication, which my hon. Friend quoted, of a change in the nature of the British role in Afghanistan. We should be involved in an informed way in those negotiations, so that we can see what they mean in terms of the number of troops who are committed, and for our future commitment to, and concept of, British operations in Afghanistan. It is difficult to be a part of those negotiations, however, when the country is in political limbo and the future of the Government is uncertain.

The Secretary of State's speech also contained some important reflections. He answered my intervention—up to a point—about the balance of resources between the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence in contributing to reconstruction, to reconciliation and to rebuilding failed states. However, he did not quite get around to saying this: conflict is probably the most important driver of poverty, and, if we cannot address conflict, we cannot address poverty.

We will have to look seriously at the balance of resources and compare the money that DFID appears to have with that which the Foreign Office and the

[Mr. Blunt]

MOD have to devote effectively to defence, diplomacy, infrastructure building, state building and everything else. There is a complete imbalance between the interests of the people whom we are trying to serve, not least in their simple relief from poverty, and the very much wider set of British national interests that must be secured in the states that we seek to help.

The Secretary of State introduced an interesting discussion about cyber-security. From the words that he used, he appeared to talk about the MOD's responsibility to secure its own information technology, but, given the capacity for a cyber attack, from a state-sponsored hit all the way down to terrorists trying to attack the information technology that controls key parts of our infrastructure and, even, to the lone hacker, we must have a better discussion of cyber-security.

Particular thought must be given to, and an examination made of, the MOD's role and responsibility for securing civil national infrastructure, because, if information technology systems were attacked from outside by whatever source, there would be crippling consequences for the United Kingdom, as, indeed, there would be for any country. We, as a nation, must decide who will take responsibility for that. Currently, the lead appears to be sitting inside GCHQ, but that comes with a whole variety of compromises in respect of how public it will be in providing that defence. On that issue, there is an important debate to be had.

I listened with wry amusement to the remarks about Bernard Gray's expected report on reorganising procurement. I could not help but have a sense of déjà vu about the issue, because the idea that we must be able to do procurement a great deal better appears to have been a constant over decades. From my examination of the issue during my 15-year association with it in one way or another, however, I have been struck by the fact that the United Kingdom appears to do defence procurement rather better than many—indeed, the majority of—other nations. I do not know whether we are still in such a position in the global league table, but I am slightly suspicious of a proposal to rip up all our defence procurement arrangements and of the idea that, if we replant them slightly differently, we will achieve the golden objective of producing the most efficient set of such arrangements in the world and save ourselves a vast amount of money. Systems can always be improved, but I wonder whether a revolution in the defence procurement process is necessary. I hope that when Mr. Gray produces his report, it will be looked at carefully— and sceptically, because there have been many efforts in the field, and not all have improved matters significantly.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Quentin Davies) *rose—*

Mr. Blunt: If the Minister will forgive me, I shall not give way. I want to conclude my remarks, as two Members wish to speak before the winding-up speeches begin.

I began my remarks with a personal reflection about my family and my wider regimental family, and I want to finish by saying that we must not forget the enormous contribution made by our servicemen and women. That is why I am horrified at the circumstances and timing of this debate. It is about a very important subject; our fellow citizens who are serving their country are fighting and dying for us. I do not think that Parliament has distinguished itself with the choice of timing for a debate on the contribution that those people are making.

4.47 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and join the chorus of disapproval for the lamentable state of this debate and its timing.

I invite the House to reflect on what we face at this moment in the Afghan conflict. I have in front of me the Op Herrick casualty and fatality tables, issued by DASA—Defence Analytical Services and Advice—up to halfway through May. I shall not dwell morbidly on the numbers, but this year is likely to be worse than last year. The rate of casualties this year so far is higher than at the same point last year; on the current trend, we will have more casualties this year than in any year since the conflict began. The fact that there is only a handful of colleagues from both sides of the House in this debate sends a lamentable message about how much the House cares about the issue. That is not a criticism of right hon. and hon. Members; as we know, a very great many, if not all, care deeply about the matter. However, given that the Chamber is so empty this afternoon, there is something wrong with the mechanism used to discuss these things.

Mr. Bob Ainsworth *rose—*

Mr. Jenkin: I see the Minister itching to intervene.

Mr. Ainsworth: I have listened to the stream of criticism from Members about the timing of the debate, and I understand people's anger. However, let us reflect on our own responsibilities for the situation. There are lots of Members from both sides who spit before someone gets the word "modernisation" out of their mouth. We have a system in which we have five defence debates per year on the Adjournment and nobody from the various parties is prepared to get together, make suggestions and talk constructively about a better way. It is a disgrace—but it reflects on us, and we ought not to throw the blame elsewhere.

Mr. Jenkin: I was not throwing blame; in fact, I was trying to avoid that.

We must change the current system, and I have some suggestions to make. We have not had a debate on a motion on Afghanistan since Op Herrick began. If there were a debate on a Government or Opposition motion as to whether we support the current policy in Afghanistan, I am sure that a great many colleagues would attend and take part.

I have a suggestion for my right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), the Chairman of the Defence Committee. It is our job as a Select Committee to sit down and discuss how defence issues are debated and scrutinised in the House as a whole, and we could make recommendations about whether there should be some changes. For example, should the five debates be on debatable motions tabled by the Government in order to find out whether the House had confidence in the aspect of policy under discussion, thereby allowing the Opposition parties to table amendments and divide the House on them?

There is another disadvantage to these very broad debates. When we come into the Chamber, we think that we are going to discuss defence in the world, and then hear announcements about equipment, points raised about spending on research and development, and tributes paid to individual servicemen. It is too broad and unfocused, and a debatable motion might improve the focus.

I am afraid that I am going to ignore Iran and North Korea, Russia and Georgia, Somalia and piracy, and all the other issues challenging global security. Having long called for a debate on Afghanistan alone, I shall concentrate on what is going on in Helmand and what flows from it. The question that must preoccupy us is whether more foreign troops in Helmand would break the deadlock. I would hazard three reasons why that might not be the case. I somehow doubt that more kinetic effort, more bombs and bullets, more helicopters, more knocking on doors in the middle of the night to try to find the terrorists, more civilian casualties, and more alienation would not lead to more insurgency.

It is tempting to believe that the strategy pursued in Anbar by General Petraeus, which empowered the Anbar tribes to take charge of their own security, in co-operation with the American military forces and the emerging Iraqi forces, might be replicated in some way in Helmand. However, that is to misunderstand the very different nature of tribal society in Helmand compared with that in Anbar. Anbar was firmly anchored in an established nation state with a strong sense of national identity—Iraq. That national identity exists to some degree in Afghanistan, but the tribal loyalties are far stronger, and, in the case of the Pashtun tribe, span its borders, as they reach into the ungoverned tribal areas of Pakistan. Pashtunistan is a country that exists in the minds of everybody who lives there—it is just not drawn on the maps that were left by the British empire. The Pashtuns have very strong tribal traditions. Pashtunwali is the honour code that requires someone to avenge the death of one of their kinsmen, which means that the effect of civilian casualties is perhaps 10 times more corrosive than in Anbar. The conduct of counter-insurgency operations therefore has to be 10 times more careful to avoid civilian casualties than in Anbar.

There is cause for optimism, because I believe American policy is shifting and developing. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State quoted General McChrystal, who has been nominated the American commander in Afghanistan and who has said:

> "If defeating an insurgent formation produces popular resentment, the victory is hollow and unsustainable".

He went on to say:

> "This is a critical point. It may be the critical point. This is a struggle for the support of the Afghan people. Our willingness to operate in ways that minimise casualties or damage—even when doing so makes our task more difficult—is essential to our credibility."

I put it to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), who served with the Light Dragoons, that that sentiment would be familiar to any soldier who served in Northern Ireland. Counter-insurgency is about tying one arm behind one's back to observe legality, proportionality and rigid discipline to a strategy. It is about ensuring that the tiniest things do not get blown up into huge strategic problems. That is extremely difficult, and I believe that the American army has learned counter-insurgency far faster than we ever imagined it would. We have to stop pretending that we in the British Army do it much better than everyone else, because the Americans have caught us up and may even be overtaking us in their capability to deliver it.

There is hope, but I remain sceptical about whether large formations of foreign military forces will work in a country where the foreigner is regarded with great suspicion, especially if he arrives carrying powerful weaponry and destructive power. I am sceptical about whether the big American surge will solve the problem. There are two more reasons for that, one of which is stated in the Government's own paper on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Page 9 of that paper, in section 3, "Afghanistan—the current situation", states: "The solution remains political". Although there are other factors, the problem has been the political failure in Afghanistan, to which I tried to draw the Secretary of State's attention—the failure in Kabul, the failure of the Karzai Government, the Bonn constitution and the western-imposed Afghan national consensus, and the corruption of that Government.

The Government's paper continues:

> "Governance is beset by corruption and lack of capacity, which is compounded by the lack of security. The combination of insecurity, poverty, lack of good governance and social and economic development, and perception of widespread corruption"—

that word again—

> "deepens the challenge of persuading the people to back their government over the Taleban... the insurgency has not been delivered a decisive blow".

Clearly the surge in operations in Afghanistan is an attempt to deliver that decisive blow, but it seems to me unlikely that it can be delivered by military means. It must be delivered by other means—by binding in the tribal structures that exist in that strong society in Afghanistan and recognising that the authority of the Kabul Government simply does not, and never will, extend into the outreaches of that extraordinarily disparate country. Governance has to arise from the strength of the local communities and cannot be premised on some abstract constitution that was written at a conference in Bonn with a substantial part of the Pashtun tribe simply not represented.

My other reason for scepticism is that the pivotal, decisive strategic engagement has shifted out of Afghanistan and is taking place in the Swat valley. That seems to be where the weight of Taliban power is concentrated. It is where they are based and from where they launch their operations. The war in the Swat valley may be the conflict that turns the war in the whole region, in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mr. Blunt: My hon. Friend is correct. However, until military operations are properly co-ordinated across the international border, the effect could be that the Taliban who do not wish to stand and fight against the Pakistan regular army are pushed out of the Swat valley, go to southern Afghanistan and head off to engage with our forces in Helmand and other coalition forces in Kandahar. Proper strategic co-operation is needed, so that if the Pakistani army conducts such an operation, it at least beats the Taliban over the international border into, for example, the prepared ambush positions of Afghan or coalition forces, as appropriate.

Mr. Jenkin: I agree with my hon. Friend to some extent, but even he is dealing at a sub-strategic level. That leads me to my next point about the importance of Pakistan.

I commend the Government for including Afghanistan and Pakistan in the same document, although we were slightly playing catch-up with the Americans, who were already on that track. However, Pakistan is crucial. There are 800,000 citizens of our country who have Pakistani origin. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says that there are probably more. However, thousands and thousands of untraceable exchanges and movements between Pakistan and our country are a direct security threat to our streets, towns and cities.

The part of the document that assesses the current situation in Pakistan refers to the "severe challenges" facing the Pakistan Government, the sharply deteriorating economic situation and the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks. It states:

"This shocking event reflected the wider problems Pakistan faces with violent extremism and terrorism. Al Qaida continues to operate in the FATA... Afghan groups also train and plan attacks on international and Afghan targets in Afghanistan from the FATA."

The document goes on to refer to the

"separatist insurgency continuing in the province of Baluchistan"

and makes the crucial claim:

"So far, however, there are no signs that terrorism or violent extremism in Pakistan are decreasing."

Until we address that problem, how will we tackle others?

I have mentioned in the House previously my concern about the disproportionality of our effort. We are putting so much effort into Afghanistan, yet so little into Pakistan. I am encouraged by the Americans' determination. The section of their paper entitled, "Assisting Pakistan's capability to fight extremists" states:

"It is vital to strengthen our efforts to both develop and operationally enable Pakistani security forces so they are capable of succeeding in sustained counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. In part this will include increased U.S. military assistance for helicopters to provide air mobility, night vision equipment, and training and equipment specifically for Pakistani Special Operation Forces and their Frontier Corps."

Bravo to the Americans! They are providing the capability that will give the Pakistani military the confidence and the capability to tackle the modern threats instead of preoccupying themselves vainly with the non-threat of India.

How does that compare with what we offer? On page 13, the Government's document, under the heading "The UK's strategic objectives", states that we will help Pakistan

"achieve its vision of becoming a stable, economically and socially developed democracy and meet its poverty reduction targets"

and encourage

"constructive Pakistani engagement on nuclear security and non-proliferation."

Those are laudable aims, but to what do they add up when dealing with the crunch problem? The document states:

"In December... we announced our largest bilateral programme of counter-terrorism support and capacity-building, worth"—

wait for it—"£10m."

Ten million pounds is not a great deal of money, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As a country that has an extraordinarily close relationship with Pakistan, we could leverage the American effectiveness hugely, if only we devoted more resources and people to what the Americans are trying to achieve, but we are simply not doing it. I do not know what special forces may or may not be doing in Pakistan, and that is not something that I intend to ask the Minister about. However, what we are providing, in terms of our official armed forces personnel in Pakistan, our diplomatic mission and our overseas aid effort, and in our military-to-military relationship, is pitifully small. Pakistan is a friendly country, but what is coming out of Pakistan is the main threat to our country today, and we are spending a pitifully small amount on confronting that threat.

Finally, the third grand strategic point for the United Kingdom in considering the topic of defence in the world is this. If we are to be a country that contributes something substantial to our security, and if more troops are needed in Afghanistan and the Americans are sending more, what will be the consequence of our being unable to do so or simply refusing to do so? What will be the consequence of our simply not providing the resources that our security requires in the region?

We also have the Basra parallel in Helmand—a point that I was going to raise in my speech, but which several of my right hon. and hon. Friends have already raised—whereby we have failed to deliver what our closest ally felt entitled to expect at the outset, namely a relative proportion of the effort, willpower and sustainment to deliver that sense of solidarity. For everything that our brilliant armed forces achieved in Basra, we left behind a feeling that we had not pulled our weight. For all the sacrifices that our armed forces made, what a terrible tragedy that that should be the feeling in much of Washington and much of the American military establishment, and the same looks to be happening in Helmand. With 17,000 US troops coming into Helmand, against our 8,300 to 8,500—I acknowledge that we are putting in the extra 700 for a temporary period—how will we be entitled to our share of command? How will we be entitled to take credit for whatever is achieved?

I know that those are political points, but we are underselling our influence with our most important ally. So much of what we do in defence and security policy is about maintaining influence over the one country that guarantees our defence and security. If we lose that influence, we will lose the leverage that this country, uniquely in the world, has an opportunity to use, and not just to the benefit of this country, but to the benefit of Europe and the whole world. I am talking about the ability to broaden the American perspective and encourage the Americans to bring more people with them, rather than finding themselves fighting on their own. We must address that, but to do so we need to address our entire defence and security policy, as my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Defence Committee said. We need to ask ourselves what sort of country we really want to be.

Whichever Government are in power, we will fight our way through this period of stringent financial controls as a result of the recession and getting our debt back under control. We will get through that, one way or another. We need to nurse our defence forces through what will be a difficult period, but what will we be

aiming for at the other end? Will we be aiming to be the power that can project military force throughout the world, fight alongside the United States and maintain its influence in the forums of the world because we will maintain our nuclear deterrent and have aircraft carriers, strike aircraft and the breadth of technological capability that means that we can interact and fight on a global basis? Or are we going to become just another passenger on the American aircraft carrier, with little say and little influence over an increasingly unstable world that threatens the safety and prosperity of our citizens and the people we represent?

We have been feeling pretty sorry for ourselves throughout the expenses crisis in the past few weeks, but I invite right hon. and hon. Members to reflect on the fact that there are people who are facing far greater challenges and dangers and far more pain than we are. In the end, we are letting those people down by asking them to take on global challenges without having a policy to match those tasks with the necessary money and political will to ensure that they succeed.

5.11 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): The international community is preparing to commemorate the 65th anniversary of D-day, but in Colchester, a much fresher and more raw anniversary will be marked next week. It will be the first anniversary of the deaths of the soldiers of the 2nd battalion, the Parachute Regiment in Afghanistan. I want primarily to talk about Afghanistan this afternoon. I see no change from a year ago in the support that we are getting from our European allies. On this European election day, perhaps I can be a bit Eurosceptic for once. A year ago, 16 Air Assault Brigade, which is based in Colchester, was in Helmand province. Ten soldiers from 2 Para lost their lives, and the brigade lost more than 30 in total.

Last autumn, at Prime Minister's questions, I challenged the Prime Minister about the need for more of our European allies to deploy ground troops in southern Afghanistan. The Ministers on the Front Bench today will know that I have raised this issue on other occasions as well, including as recently as this Monday at Defence questions, when I asked the Secretary of State:

"Will the Secretary of State list the countries in the European Union that have deployed ground forces to southern Afghanistan?"

He replied:

"Yes, I will: Romania, the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia and Belgium".—[*Official Report*, 1 June 2009; Vol. 493, c. 13.]

He went on to say that France was flying fast jets in the south of Afghanistan, but my question was about ground forces.

Let us pay tribute to Romania, the Netherlands, Denmark, Estonia and Belgium for deploying ground troops. However, that answer highlights the failure of the other European nations in NATO that talk the talk, but do not walk the walk when it comes to southern Afghanistan. What are France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Poland doing? They are big countries, but they have not deployed ground forces to southern Afghanistan. If there are constraints on those countries—constitutional reasons, perhaps—that prevent them from deploying troops, they can still assist in other ways. They could assist with security measures, medical support, logistics and a whole range of other things. They could provide helicopters, for example. However, I do not see much of that happening.

I hope that, in highlighting this issue in my brief contribution to the debate, I can persuade the British Government to bring pressure to bear, through their contacts, on the other European countries in NATO to deploy ground troops. We cannot expect only the United States, the United Kingdom and some of the smaller countries of Europe to do so.

Mr. Blunt: It is easy to criticise our European partners in this matter, but we should remember that the authors of this strategy were the British Government. When the right hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (John Reid) was Defence Secretary, he thought it appropriate to deploy NATO in this fashion—as it is deployed in Afghanistan—and he drove that policy very hard. I do not think that our European powers were wildly enthusiastic about it, which has now partly been reflected in the quality of their contribution. We did not get the strategy sorted out at the beginning, so the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) is effectively reflecting on one of the consequences of that failure.

Bob Russell: This is a NATO exercise as far as I am concerned, and the consequences of whatever goes wrong in Afghanistan are exported to mainland Europe as well as to the United Kingdom. Whatever the background as to why we are where we are, I want to make my point as strongly as I can.

I have already mentioned that it is European election day today. Every Army married quarters in my constituency is located within the Maypole Division, and there are military families living in St. Michael's, Montgomery and Drury Meadows estates. I want to put on record the fact that within the last 24 hours, leaflets have been distributed there saying that Liberal Democrat policies include

"Establishing a Single European Army".

That is simply not true. I do not blame Conservative Members who are here, as they did not put the literature out, but it did go out in the name of their party. When we are talking to military families, I believe that we must be 100 per cent. factual: it is wrong to deceive, mislead or whatever. Those families have enough issues on their plate without being told untruths of that sort. I do not support a European army. It is quite clear from what I have said that we want European collaboration and support, which is a world of difference away from having a European army.

I believe that all of us are united when we participate in defence debates in the House. Through my involvement with the armed forces parliamentary scheme on two occasions and my membership of the Committee considering the Armed Forces Bill, I have sensed that there are far more areas of common agreement than disagreement. Of course there are some disagreements, but everyone here today is, I believe, broadly of the same mind and united in our support of Her Majesty's armed forces. I pay tribute to them, and to the increasing role played by females. As Members may have gathered from the question that I put to the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon), I draw the line at females being

[Bob Russell]

in the front line of the infantry. That is not to say that they should not be in the front line in many other respects, but I am sure that my point is well understood.

As I indicated by my question to the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, I also pay tribute to the role played by soldiers—some airmen and sailors, but predominantly soldiers—from the Commonwealth, and I would like to conclude by drawing the House's attention to early-day motion 1516. It pays tribute to Lance-Corporal Johnson Beharry, VC, who Members may recall was subjected to a vicious verbal attack by the British National party, which questioned his heroism. The early-day motion rebuts those wicked words of attack on him. It says:

"That this House...is proud that HM Armed Forces comprises men and women from all ethnic backgrounds, from the UK and the Commonwealth, plus Gurkhas from Nepal; notes as an historic fact that people of all racial groups served, and lost their lives, fighting fascism in the Second World War and thus helped to preserve this country's freedoms against such evils; deplores the use in BNP election literature of a false photograph of a British soldier, with false quote, claiming support for the BNP; and urges the Government to ensure that the British people are made fully aware that the BNP represents the views which Britain went to war to defeat."

It is appropriate to quote that early-day motion on the day of the European elections, and when the House is discussing defence in the world.

5.20 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on what he has just said. I was proud to sign his early-day motion and I would like to reassure him about one thing. I do not know what the parliamentary term for "scum" is, but when people such as those in the British National party behave in the way he described, we can be all the more reassured about how right we are to condemn, oppose and disrespect them and all their works. I only hope that, despite all the provocations from Westminster to our constituents, they nevertheless have the maturity and good sense to do the same to the BNP in the elections today.

However, in the spirit of partisanship, which I cannot entirely resist, I say to the hon. Gentleman that if it were not for the Liberal Democrats' policy of proportional representation, the prospects of the BNP leader entering the European Parliament would be much smaller.

In March 2008 I had the privilege of giving a joint presentation—I must stress that I was very much the junior partner—to a group called First Defence, of which I was the parliamentary chairman. The presentation was entitled "Counter-Insurgency in Principle and Practice". I was talking about some of the principles of counter-insurgency, but the person everyone came to listen to was Dr. David Kilcullen, who was talking about his experiences in practice in Iraq.

One of the most important points about people such as Dr. Kilcullen—who was, among other things, a special adviser to General Petraeus and subsequently to Condoleezza Rice—is that the architects of what we hope will be the ultimately successful strategy in Iraq are also some of the people who are least dogmatic about the methods that one can adopt to deal with terrorists and insurgents.

In his book "The Accidental Guerrilla", which has just been published, Dr. Kilcullen says that in many cases the people against whom we find ourselves fighting would not have taken up arms against us had we not gone into their countries in the first place. That is a message that one gets from all parts of the House, although it is at the same time acknowledged that sometimes, even though such fighting is a consequence of our having had to go into those countries, we had little alternative. However, as Dr. Kilcullen stresses, we should do so only as a last resort.

I have pointed out previously that there are some similarities between orthodox political campaigning and the methods used by terrorist groups, albeit not in the moral dimension. There are at least five principles that terrorist groups adopt. I shall quickly list them. The first is:

"always fight on ground where you are strongest and your opponent weakest".

The next two are:

"always seek maximum impact for minimum effort"

and

"try to manoeuvre your opponent into a situation where he is damned if he does, but damned if he doesn't".

That is precisely what I described in relation to the reaction, in the case of Afghanistan, when an attack was mounted against the American homeland from a country in which it would be difficult and bloody to intervene. The last two principles are:

"use your opponent's own weight to drag him down ('military jiu-jitsu')"

and

"apply these methods simultaneously and repeatedly".

To a large extent, the methods adopted by the Americans and the British have been to try to use conventional military power against such unconventional enemies. We need to try to avoid being bled dry, however, in a form of warfare that involves fighting on the enemy's strongest ground, not ours. Of the many wise words in Dr. Kilcullen's latest book, which I commend to Members in all parts of the House, he says:

"In military terms, for AQ—

al-Qaeda—

"the 'main effort' is information; for us, information is a 'supporting effort'....Thus, to combat"—

al-Qaeda—

"propaganda, we need a capacity for strategic information warfare—an integrating function that draws together all components of what we say, and what we do, to send strategic messages that support our overall policy."

Mr. Jenkin: Quite right.

Dr. Lewis: I am glad my hon. Friend says so. Dr. Kilcullen continues:

"Building such a capability is perhaps the most important of our many capability challenges in this new era of hybrid warfare."

It has been difficult for colleagues to get to grips with a subject as broadly defined as defence in the world. I entirely agree with the suggestion by my hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) that such debates

are too broad in nature. My view is that the older concept of the single-service debate concentrated the minds of hon. Members, and concentrated the subject matter in the context of the various campaigns in which we were involved or likely to become involved.

Mr. Jenkin: Traditionally, in the past few decades, we have conducted such debates in peacetime. We are now debating a war, and it is absurd that we include it in a general debate about defence policy. It does not make sense.

Dr. Lewis: I accept that point, but even in the context of debating a war, it would be better not only to have specific debates on the specific combat parameters but specific debates on the individual services. Otherwise, we will see reflected in the debate the internecine conflict going on between those at the most senior levels of the armed forces. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Ann Winterton)—who has carried out a very focused campaign about armoured vehicles and their inadequacies—has touched on that issue, too. She referred to the change in the nature of warfare, and to a particular speech that, she said, meant that we must move away from preparation for conventional state-on-state warfare towards configuring the main effort of our armed forces for the type of wars in which we are engaged today.

I have raised that subject previously at the Dispatch Box, and in my opinion people from particular armed services who take that point of view are going up a blind alley, and a dangerous one at that. Although it is terribly important to be able to configure our forces to fight counter-insurgency campaigns, and absolutely vital to ensure that we give our forces the resources to fight them effectively, we must never lose sight of the fact that the primary role of our armed forces must be to insure against the possibility that in 10, 20, 30 or 40 years we might face an existential threat to the peace and freedom of our homeland. I for one do not subscribe to the view that we must dismantle our ability to deter, and if necessary combat, another state armed with modern weapons systems that could threaten us in the future, just because for the foreseeable future we do not think that threat will arise. The lesson of the past, whether the late 19th century, the first half of the 20th century or even the post-war conflicts of the second half of the 20th century, is that when such threats materialise, the vast majority have not been anticipated.

Nick Harvey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Lewis: I am afraid not, because I have three minutes left. Please forgive me.

I was impressed by what the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) said about the past role of Porthcawl and the massing there for the D-day invasion. I have heard similar stories about my home town, Swansea. Swansea bay was the home of the second wave of the invasion armada. No part of the water could be seen, so packed was it with the vessels that were about to sail across the channel.

I was somewhat less impressed by what the hon. Lady said about the European Union keeping the peace. I must point out to her that the European Community, in the form of the European Coal and Steel Community, did not come into existence until 1953, and the common market itself did not come into existence until 1957. I do not think that there was any appreciable diminution in the threat of western Europeans fighting each other after 1953, or even 1957, than there had been between 1945 and 1953 and 1957. What really matters is whether the individual countries of Europe have democratic political systems. If they do, they will not fight each other, and if they have NATO, it is to be hoped that they will not have to fight anyone outside their boundaries either.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), the Chairman of the Select Committee, drew attention to the horrific prospect of a black hole in the defence budget. I have pointed out before, and I will point out again this evening, that we are in a strange situation. The defence budget as a proportion of GDP has remained constant both before and after the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which can only mean that we were fighting two counter-insurgency campaigns at one stage, and are fighting one counter-insurgency campaign now, on what is effectively a peacetime defence budget. That really cannot go on.

Let me say this in the last moments allocated to me. It is normally quite difficult to sum up a debate because there have been so many contributions. By the end of this debate we shall have heard six speeches from the Conservatives, including the two from the Front Bench. That is more than we shall have heard from the other two parties put together. There will have been three speeches from Labour Members, and two from Liberal Democrats. That is not the way in which we should be debating the most important defence matters of the year.

As no one is listening, let me conclude by sharing a confidence with the House. I actually rather like and admire the Defence Ministers who have been appointed by the Government, and I know that they probably did not want the debate to be held on this day any more than anyone else did. The question is: who did want that, and why? To hold a debate of this sort on a day when everyone is voting in elections suggests either a calculated insult or a complete disregard for—or misunderstanding of—the importance of the subject matter. I know that the Ministers will have done their best, but who was responsible? Was it the Chief Whip? Was it the Prime Minister? I think we should be told.

5.33 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Bob Ainsworth): Despite the lack of density on the Benches, we have had our usual wide-ranging, thoughtful and informed debate. The Secretary of State opened it with a review of current operations, and a more detailed account of the evolving threats that we face and his response to them. I shall make a few comments on those issues, and then try to respond to all the points that Members have made.

We cannot afford to ignore the lessons of current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. We must capture and institutionalise them. The integrated military and civilian structures that we now have on the ground in Helmand have developed the hard way. We need to use them as a blueprint for how we do things in the future, not in theatre but in Whitehall and in the international context. That is why we in the MOD, together with our

[Mr. Bob Ainsworth]

colleagues in the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development, lend our full support to the Defence Committee's inquiry into the comprehensive approach. I believe that the Committee, chaired by the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), can make a valuable contribution, and may be able to help us all to drive the policy a little further.

Looking ahead, we also need to ensure that, despite the economic challenges, we get the balance of decisions right so that, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, we can "stretch, surge and recover". There are two elements to that. First, we must understand the capability mix that we need in order to fight both present conflicts and those we may face in the future. We must not be starry-eyed about the options open to us. We do not have the scope that the Americans have to flex budgets from hybrid warfare to conventional warfare. We have to get more out of our equipment and we must have flexibility from our people—we have that—and we must use it to the full. We must also think across the full range of our responsibilities. Secondly, we must ensure that our own financial controls and acquisition structures help rather than hinder our efforts to drive down costs and deliver timely capability. I think that Bernard Gray's report will be a very good starting point for the work that we need to do on that.

Finally, we need to make our international institutions as effective as possible. We need to make them relevant to the public they are supposed to serve. The UK must work with our partners to drive forward reform in the international sphere: in the United Nations; through a new strategic concept in NATO, the cornerstone of our defence; and by strengthening the European Union's ability to play the role that it undoubtedly can.

I understand why many Members throw their hands up in frustration—or in downright antagonism—whenever Europe is mentioned, as it can be frustrating, but we cannot hope to counter the threats of today on our own. We must persevere in building flexible solutions rather than fuelling bureaucracy. I believe we have managed this well in the anti-piracy operation off the horn of Africa, where we have provided command and effective co-ordination not only for our European partners, but for many other nations as well.

The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) discussed the rules of engagement for piracy and why pirates were released recently by the Royal Navy. That was not down to a lack in the rules of engagement; we have flexed the rules of engagement to make absolutely sure that our people are able to counter the threat of piracy, but we also have to respect the fact that we are getting a lot of assistance from Kenya. It is happy to take people to where we have the evidence to prosecute them, but we should not—we must not—abuse the hospitality, as it were, given by the Kenyan nation. Therefore, where evidence does not exist, we need to be sensible and disarm and destroy inappropriate equipment and be prepared to set people free. The kinetic element is only part of the structure being put in place to counter piracy, and of course I accept that it cannot be dealt with purely within the maritime environment. The Royal Navy is holding the ring for us and is providing some mitigation, but the problems of Somalia are the cornerstone of the issue.

Mr. Jenkin: I just wish to make it clear that I am sure that the rules of engagement reflect the legal advice that has been given, and that I make absolutely no criticism of the commanding officer of the ship involved, but will the Minister explain what is wrong in law with detaining someone who clearly has all the paraphernalia of piracy and is, circumstantially at least, exhibiting a threat? This seems inexplicable. The law must be deficient in this regard, and it must be changed even if we need a UN resolution in order to be able to do so.

Mr. Ainsworth: Yes, but whose law needs to be changed? We have to take these steps while accepting what the Kenyans are prepared to do for us and being enormously grateful to them for their efforts. Let me say, as I said at Question Time, that I have no intention of allowing the Royal Navy to be used as a taxi service for asylum seekers—that will not happen while I am Minister for the Armed Forces and if that means that we have to set people free off the coast of Somalia, we will do so. We will do what we can in the circumstances.

The hon. Member for North Essex said that he thought our attitude to the American capability on counter-insurgency was arrogant. I do not see that arrogance in our military and I do not believe it exists in the body politic in this country either; there is great respect for the work that was done first by General Petraeus in Iraq and which is now preached by General McChrystal in Afghanistan. Huge leaps have been made in capability and doctrine by the American military. We must recognise that, and we buy into it totally—we need to work alongside them.

The hon. Gentleman and the Chair of the Defence Committee talked ably about the complexities involved in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and said that much more needed to be done. I do not detract from that at all, but we need to understand that Pakistan is a sovereign nation, it has its own priorities and red lines and it is a very important player in this circumstance. We have to work with the Pakistani Government and not attempt to impose something unacceptable on them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs. Moon) is a new member of the Defence Committee, and I thank her very much for her effort and the work that she is putting in on that Committee. She lamented the lack of recognition that there is for our armed forces. I genuinely believe that there has been a phenomenal improvement in that regard over the past couple of years, which is much welcome. It is deeply welcomed by the people at the hard end—those who do the fighting and the dangerous work on our behalf. Sadly, as many in this House recognise, she is right to say that a recognition of their amazing capability and the amazing people that they are does not transfer to the level of understanding that we need among our population about the issues with which our forces deal. We all have a duty and a responsibility to try to work on that and improve that understanding.

My hon. Friend responded to a question from the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell), who later raised the issue again, on women in close combat. We

are reviewing the issue and we will do so without prejudice or precondition. The situation is not simple because there is no simple front line. We have women who are involved in logistical operations—supply lines and so on—in Afghanistan and they have effectively involved themselves in close combat, because they are obliged to do so. As we review this, we must take into account the complexities of the warfare that we are fighting and the fact that female members of our armed forces are, from time to time, in the thick of it, alongside their male counterparts. I do not think that we can have a politically correct situation on the one hand, or have prejudice on the other. We have to be objective as we undertake the review.

The hon. Member for Colchester also raised the issue of the despicable literature—there is cross-party consensus in the House on its nature—from the British National party about Johnson Beharry, and I am glad that he did so. I am not free to sign his early-day motion, but if I was, I would rush to the Table Office to do so.

Mr. Blunt: Next week, Bob.

Mr. Ainsworth: That soon!

I have agreed to finish my speech shortly, and I am aware that I have not managed to reply on all the issues. The hon. Member for North Devon (Nick Harvey) recognised the huge improvements to vehicles that have been made, but he was very concerned about helicopters. We will soon have a Merlin free to go to Afghanistan, and before the end of the year we will have eight Chinook too. There has been a massive increase in the number of hours of helicopter availability, but we can never have enough helicopter lift and I accept that we need to do all that we can to provide it.

Mrs. Moon: The Opposition have claimed that no one was listening to this debate. I can advise my hon. Friend that I have already received an e-mail from a gentleman who does not live in my constituency, a veteran from Penzance called Mr. Brian Jenkins—not the Member with the same name. He served in the armed forces between 1969 and 1971 and he has been following the debate today. I am sure that many others also have.

Mr. Ainsworth: I thank my hon. Friend for that information, but in response to the many hon. Members who have complained about the timing of the debate, I must point out that we all share a responsibility for failing to work together. If people are unhappy that we have five defence debates on motions for the Adjournment, they should stop spitting every time the word "modernisation" is mentioned and be prepared to work with others to put the defence debates on a better footing. If there were a genuine cross-party attempt to do that, it would be successful.

Dr. Fox: It is clear to anyone who has followed the debate that the complaint has not been about the number of debates, but that the Government business managers purposely put this debate on today, polling day, when a minimum number of Members would be present to take part. It was also squeezed by a topical debate, so that one of our full defence debates—on some of the most important issues, including Afghanistan—was allowed four hours in the parliamentary year. That is a disgrace.

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman is being disingenuous. He and his party pushed for the topical debates. If we are to be genuine about this, we need to accept that if we want five debates on defence on the Adjournment, there will be consequences. If we wanted to change that, we could—

Ann Winterton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Ainsworth: No, I am about to conclude. I will respond in writing to Members whose points I have not managed to address. I know that the hon. Lady has asked me to do that on one particular issue.

While we plan for the future, our focus must always and rightly remain on current operations in Afghanistan. Our people are fighting and, sadly, sometimes dying to bring stability to that benighted country. They are entitled to expect 100 per cent. support from everyone in defence, Government and industry. That is the very least that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of defence in the world.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 10 June, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motion in the names of Mr Elfyn Llwyd and Angus Robertson as if the day were an Opposition Day; and proceedings on the Motion may continue for three hours or until 7.00 pm, whichever is earlier, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(*Ian Lucas.*)

Safeguarding Children (Private Schools)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Ian Lucas.)*

5.49 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North) (Lab): I am grateful to have secured this Adjournment debate on an important subject. It is perhaps appropriate that it should take place on a day when there are local government elections, as a tier of local government deals with education. It is precisely that that I want to talk about.

The subject of the debate is a general one—the safeguarding of children in private schools—but I will draw on a specific example in my constituency, which is the case of St. Peter's independent school. The aim of this debate is to call on the Government to give children in private schools the same level and type of protection as children in state schools; to ask the Government to close a loophole that leaves directors of children's services unable to intervene in independent schools to protect the welfare and safeguarding of children in the same way as they can intervene in state schools. Children should have the same safeguards whatever type of school they are in and those powers should be exercised locally by the local authority, which has overall responsibility for protecting the safety of children in that local authority area.

I am not going to go into all the events surrounding St. Peter's, despite the protections that this Chamber provides. There are children studying at that school and their interests have to be regarded. There are also children in my constituency who were former students at the school and their private interests must be regarded, too. I also want to stress that this is not a matter of private schools versus state schools. Many independent schools have very good practice in child safety and well-being, as they have in education. There are also associations for independent schools that provide support and advice in these important areas. Those factors were all well documented in Roger Singleton's excellent review of safeguarding arrangements in independent schools.

The problem that I want to identify and focus on is what more is needed to ensure that there are proper safeguards in place for the small minority of independent schools that fall through the net, and where standards are not acceptable to ensure that any problems can be dealt with quickly and locally. Although I am drawing from an example in my constituency, that issue is also of wider concern to directors of children's services in other parts of the country.

In the case of St. Peter's, the lack of proper safeguarding arrangements and the lack of powers to allow the local authority to intervene have had serious and continuing consequences for some of the children and, indeed, for their parents. I would argue that much of the delay in dealing with the problems, because of the lack of adequate powers to be operated at a local level, has made the situation more acute for everyone concerned.

Back in 2000, an Ofsted inspection of St. Peter's found:

"The school has many strengths and few weaknesses; it provides a good education."

Significantly, it found:

"The school has a brief but adequate policy on child protection."

It also found:

"There are sufficient suitably qualified and experienced staff to teach most areas of the curriculum satisfactorily".

In 2006, there was a further inspection, which again found that St. Peter's

"is a good school and is successful in its aim of providing a good all-round education for pupils with a wide range of abilities. There is outstanding provision for the personal development of"

children. It found:

"The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils are satisfactory. The school maintains a high level of care for pupils".

and

"The school has due regard to the safety of the pupils. Policies are comprehensive and include procedures for child protection, anti-bullying strategies, First Aid, health and safety issues and fire safety."

It also found that the school met most of the requirements for registration. That was in November 2006.

Just 18 months later, some constituents came to see me expressing concern about events at the school—first one parent, then two, then a group. Their concerns were about educational issues, about some issues relating to school resources and facilities, such as problems with cleaning and furniture in the school, and about some specific allegations of unacceptable or inappropriate behaviour. Those were the matters of real concern to me. Whatever the educational issues—parents are entitled to make choices about the type of education that they want for their children—the allegations about behaviour seem to me to be absolutely straightforward. They should have led to the relevant people being suspended, be they students or staff, so that investigations could be carried out according to a proper, established, recognised procedure so that remedial action could be taken and things could be put back on course. That is the kind of thing that many of us have, unfortunately, seen happen in our local authority education or children's services. It is not a sign of great success, but it is a sign that there are safeguards in place to deal with problems when they arise.

Let me indicate the nature of the allegations made. I do not want to go into all the details, but they were of children being hit; of children having their personal information disclosed in front of their class; of children being left in classrooms with a video camera on them in the absence of a teacher; of a girl being made to change in one of those classrooms with the video camera on; and of the arbitrary and inappropriate punishment of children. There are more, quite substantial, allegations of that type.

On taking up my constituents' complaints, I found that a police-led inquiry into the allegations had already been set up, involving local agencies including the local education authority and a representative from the school. As it turned out, that representative was a trustee who was involved with a local firm that had acted on behalf of one of the members of staff about whom allegations had been made. The firm is also now involved in legal action against some of the parents.

I spent a considerable amount of time in the summer of 2008 trying to find a way forward for my constituents, and that included a lot of discussions with colleagues at the Department for Children, Schools and Families here in Westminster. Eventually—and it was eventually—Ofsted agreed to conduct a further inspection. In addition,

the Charity Commission set up an inquiry into the trust that owns the school. I also spoke a number of times to Ministers in the DCSF and, of course, extensively to the director of children's services in Northamptonshire, as well as to the police and other agencies. I have to say that getting action on this matter was one of the most difficult, frustrating experiences that I have ever had. Despite the obvious concerns of my constituents, at every turn the argument was that no one had the power to do anything. In particular, and probably most importantly, the local director of children's services did not have the powers to act that he would have had if St. Peter's had been a local authority school.

So what was the result of all the complaints? When the Ofsted inspection report came out in September 2008, it found that

"St Peter's Independent School does not meet all the regulations for independent schools, and in particular the overall provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is inadequate. This is primarily because safeguarding procedures are inadequate. The failure to properly safeguard pupils means that the overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage is inadequate."

It listed 30 recommendations that the school had to follow to meet the standards required for independent schools. Among the shortcomings found by Ofsted was the fact that although all the staff, with two exceptions, had been subject to Criminal Records Bureau checks, a number had not been vetted at the required enhanced level. The chair of governors had not carried out all the necessary checks on board members, and there was not robust enough checking of staff, including those who had lived outside the UK, before they were appointed. The child protection policy was not up to date, comprehensive or implemented effectively. There were other criticisms, too.

A notice was served on the school requiring it to produce an action plan. That is now being progressed, and there has been a further report from Ofsted, which was quite supportive. The Charity Commission's report on its investigation into the school found shortcomings in the workings of the trust that runs the school. Those shortcomings included the fact that the trustees

"did not manage the risks arising from the allegations and complaints"

made by parents, had failed to comply with the commission's first directive, and had provided the commission with misleading information, although they later co-operated and had been working to put things right.

The police finished their report and passed a file to the Crown Prosecution Service, which decided not to prosecute. However, the CPS, in a letter to me, concluded:

"The allegations of assault amounted to incidents which would be categorised as common assault for the purpose of charge. This is significant as charges of common assault have to be brought within six months of the date of the alleged offence. All of the allegations which, in my judgement, amount to allegations of assault fell outside that six month limit. Furthermore, one allegation of assault was said to have been committed on a school trip in France, taking it outside the jurisdiction of the English Courts."

6 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Ian Lucas.)*

Ms Keeble: I thought that that the sub judice rule was about to be raised, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I had mentioned something that might be before the courts.

The problems for the family who made the complaints continue. Those who took their children out of the school, or had them excluded due to the events surrounding the allegations, are being pursued by the school for repayment of fees, despite the fact that the children were sometimes removed due to events that were well outwith the parents' control. One family was taken to court after they removed their child. They lost their case, the school was awarded costs and the family declared themselves bankrupt and lost their home.

Another family are being taken to court, and the discussions are that their child might be called on to give evidence about events that a child would not normally be expected to give in open court. Basically, it is evidence about an indecent assault, and it seems wholly inappropriate even to consider trying that in court as part of a debt recovery action. A third family are also in the early stages of having legal action taken against them, and a number of others have settled privately after their children were excluded.

It seems that this is a very unsatisfactory conclusion to a very poorly managed sequence of events. First, real questions must be asked about why Ofsted was so lax in finding the difficulties at the school, and why it needed so much persuasion to undertake the necessary investigation to put in place an action plan to resolve the problems. For example, how in 2000 did it find:

"The school has a brief but adequate policy on child protection";

and, in 2006, that there was

"due regard to the safety of pupils. Policies are comprehensive";

but then make, in 2008, a whole list of recommendations for the action that would be needed to bring safeguarding policies up to standard?

It also seems completely inexplicable that in 2000 Ofsted should find:

"There are sufficiently suitably qualified and experienced staff to teach most areas of the curriculum satisfactorily,"

but then that the school does not even have a process for properly CRB-checking staff to the right standard, and that it does not necessarily vet staff properly before it gives them jobs and allows them to teach at the school.

It is also wrong that events that take place in respect of a school cannot be prosecuted because they are out of school time or take place on a school trip. It is even worse if events take place on a school trip—when the school is acting in place of the parents. If they take place in the UK, at least the children can speak to their parents in the evening. It seems completely wrong also that such events should be immune from any other form of investigation or sanction.

One reads in the paper complaints of teachers having their careers ruined because of false allegations of assault, and they are extremely worrying, but, equally, it is important that there are procedures for dealing with allegations of behaviour that might fall far short of criminal conduct but breach rules for professional conduct. They might require not prosecution but some local sanction—for example, in the school, through training or improvement, or through measures to deal with the children's behaviour, if that is the problem. It is also wrong that the problems had to escalate to the point at which prosecution was even considered; I would have thought that behaviour in schools would be of a far higher standard. Such problems should certainly not be allowed to persist.

[Ms Keeble]

The parents should have been able to get their complaints dealt with quickly. If the school was not prepared to deal with them, they should have been able to get prompt local action. As it was, things had to be escalated so that they were dealt with by Ministers and Ofsted, which, obviously, has a vast array of other schools and issues other than safeguarding to deal with. In this instance, it was required to do things that properly should have been done at the first stage by the local authority.

Furthermore, it is wrong that national intervention was needed by not only Ofsted but the Charity Commission. Our local children's services director knew about the problem. He had extensive dealings with it and knew what type of resolution was needed. However, he was completely powerless to act, short of removing all the children from the school. That would have been completely counter-productive and probably open to legal challenge.

Since all this happened, the Government have commissioned a review by Roger Singleton to consider safeguarding arrangements in independent schools, non-maintained special schools and boarding schools. I have contributed to the review. Its recommendations have been largely accepted by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, which will consult further on proposals in September. I urge the Department and the Minister to plug the loophole in the legislation to ensure that local children's services directors have the power to intervene on safeguarding issues in independent non-maintained special schools and boarding schools, to protect the welfare of children and make sure that the powers given to children's services directors under the Children Act 2004 extend to independent schools as much as to state schools.

In respect of private schools, children's services directors need to be able to intervene on the basis of allegations, to investigate and to make recommendations that must be followed to put in place the required changes, just as they can in state schools. They also need to intervene on the governors or trustees of private schools, just as they can with state schools, to make sure that those people are held properly accountable for the safeguarding arrangements, welfare and well-being of the children.

It is completely wrong that one set of rules on child safety and protection should apply to state schools and another set to independent schools. The safeguarding of children is rightly seen as a matter for the local community. The local community, through the local authority and its children's services, should have the power to protect all children, whatever type of school they attend. They should also have the power to make the process transparent for the public, so that people in the wider local community can understand what is happening and see the safeguards that are put in place.

State schools have become accustomed to being named and shamed, and that can be a scarring experience for any school. However, it is now understood that the wider community is entitled to a certain level of information about what happens to children in a school, and it is important that there should be the same transparency to the wider community at independent schools as there is in state schools. The constituents who came to me do not get information about what has happened as a result of their children's complaints. They have been left on the sidelines, with significant and substantial problems to deal with as a result of what happened in that school.

I would not want any other group of parents, or indeed any other MP, to have to be in a position of knowing that things have gone wrong in a school and that nobody is prepared to step forward and say, "I have the power to sort this out." Instead, it is divided around a whole range of different agencies, and it takes, as in this case, many months to resolve problems which, if the local authority had the power to do so, could have been dealt with much more quickly, to the benefit of the children, the teachers and the parents in surrounding areas who might want to send their children to that school. I urge my hon. Friend to ensure that this loophole is closed and that all children, whatever type of school they attend, are given the same safeguards by law.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Before I call the Minister to reply, let me say to the hon. Lady, who feared at an earlier point that I was going to correct her on the matter of sub judice, that as a significant part of her speech related to a particular establishment, it might have assisted the House if that had been reflected in the title that she chose for her debate.

6.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Sarah McCarthy-Fry): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on securing this debate. I know that she has campaigned strongly on this issue, and it is clear from her speech that she considers the safety and well-being of children and young people in her constituency an absolute priority.

I am sure that we would all agree that those concerns about safety extend across both sides of the House. As Members of Parliament, as a Government and of course as a society, we all recognise that our first priority must always be to keep children safe. Of course, that responsibility extends to all school pupils, whether they are in the independent or the maintained sector. As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, all independent schools must be registered with the Department for Children, Schools and Families. As a condition of this registration, and indeed continued registration, they must meet the standards we would expect of any school in the maintained sector. Those standards include the quality of welfare provided to children and the extent to which they protect the health and safety of each and every child in their care.

In 2007, the Government introduced the guidance, "Safeguarding Children and Safer Recruitment in Education", which maintained and independent schools are required to comply with. It sets out employers' duties and responsibilities with regard to child protection, including working to locally agreed procedures for dealing with allegations, and the involvement of police and other local agencies. It also sets out the need for all staff to undertake child protection training and for schools to have a designated child protection officer. In short, when a parent opts their child out of the maintained sector, they do not opt out of their child's right to a safe education.

As I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate, it is not appropriate for me to comment on individual cases of teacher conduct or specific allegations against staff. However, I can say without hesitation that there simply is not one rule for the maintained sector and another for the independent sector. Local authorities have the same powers to intervene in relation to state and independent schools. If there is any particular issue that she is concerned about, I will be more than happy to meet her to discuss it further.

Ms Keeble: That is absolutely contrary to everything that everybody has said, including several of my hon. Friend's colleagues, right the way through the whole process. It has always been said, and it has been said again this evening by the children's services director, that local authorities do not have the power to intervene.

Sarah McCarthy-Fry: Then I can only reiterate that if the advice that I have been given is incorrect, I will be more than happy to discuss the matter with my hon. Friend.

St Peter's school is no different from any other in the sense that neither the Secretary of State, the local authority, the police nor social services has the power to force a school to suspend a teacher pending investigations of abuse. The power to make that decision rests with the management of the school alone, and any change to the status quo would require a change in the law. However, as I have already said, there is a statutory obligation on every school, regardless of whether it is maintained or independent, to ensure the safety and well-being of its pupils. Inspections of independent schools follow exactly the same processes as those of any other school, to ensure that those obligations are met. It goes without saying that any school that fails to meet the required standards can be deregistered.

I am aware of my hon. Friend's concerns about the trustees of St Peter's, but their actions are a matter for the Charity Commission to consider. Our concern has to be first and foremost to ensure that children learn in a safe environment. We rely on local authorities and Ofsted to judge whether arrangements are in place to allow that to happen. Councils have the lead in deciding what safeguarding arrangements need to be made locally, so in the case of St Peter's school it is up to Northamptonshire county council to decide what should apply.

It is critical to note that there should never be any question of a child's safety being threatened. Local authorities will always have the power to remove any child from a situation in which they might be threatened, regardless of whether that is in an independent or maintained school. Of course, any parent whose child is at an independent school and who is worried about their safety will always be given the option of taking up a place at a maintained school. I shall come later to further measures that we are taking to improve safeguarding arrangements.

My hon. Friend mentioned Ofsted. I am aware, of course, of the concerns that the agency raised in its inspection of St Peter's last year, to which she referred. She also mentioned previous Ofsted inspections. Inspections are valid only at a particular point in time, and in our experience things can change rapidly. Last year, inspectors highlighted a number of key areas that had to be improved for the school to remain registered and, as she told us, they described safeguarding procedures as "inadequate". They found, for example, that the child protection policy was out of date, that proper Criminal Records Bureau checks had not been carried out and that not all staff had been properly vetted. Clearly, that was totally unacceptable. However, it is important to note that Ofsted found that on a day-to-day basis pupils were generally well cared for, and that children described behaviour in the school as good.

I am pleased to say that the school appears to have taken the report seriously. Following statutory notice to improve, action has now been taken. As my hon. Friend is aware, inspectors returned to the school at the end of April this year and their report confirms that the school has now addressed those earlier safeguarding failings. A copy of their report has been sent to the school, which will no doubt examine it and further address the inspectors' findings. It is worth mentioning that like maintained schools, many independent schools are inspected by Ofsted every three years, and we will always respond to any complaints about the school in question.

I hope that I have been able to provide some reassurance that safety nets are in place to help protect children in independent schools, but this is not in any way, shape or form a matter on which this Government are remotely complacent. We are more determined than ever to make this the safest country in the world for all children to study in, regardless of their background. That is why we are introducing, through the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, the toughest possible vetting and barring system for all those working, or seeking to work, with children and vulnerable adults. It is why we have made CRB checks mandatory for all new appointments to the school work force, and why we commissioned Sir Roger Singleton to review safeguarding arrangements in independent schools.

Sir Roger's report was published in March, and the Secretary of State immediately accepted every one of his 32 recommendations, which included ensuring that all boarding schools are properly regulated; providing greater support for independent schools to help them improve safeguarding practice; improving information sharing and schools' self-evaluation of safeguarding performance; and strengthening the relationship between schools and their local safeguarding children boards. In addition, Sir Roger has made it clear that he wants to see school proprietors make arrangements for annual, independent scrutiny that would challenge their schools' safeguarding policies and practice.

A report of that scrutiny will then be made available to the Department, as a further means of strengthening those checks and balances. I know that officials are already working on amending the appropriate guidance and legislation in the light of those recommendations. It is encouraging that Sir Roger's report seems to have been received so well by independent schools as well as local authorities and Ofsted.

It is worth mentioning the role of the Charity Commission, to which I referred earlier. As a registered charity, St. Peter's—and many other independent schools like it—is answerable to the commission. The organisation launched its investigation into the school in February, and expressed several serious concerns about leadership and the trustees' stewardship of the school. Consequently, it issued a direction to the school to undertake a

[Sarah McCarthy-Fry]

comprehensive governance review of the charity, including the development of a risk management strategy relating to child protection. As I understand it, that was to include staff training as appropriate. I know that the commission has since been very positive about the way in which the trustees of St Peter's have accepted the challenge. I believe that the school has taken on board all the commission's regulatory advice, guidance and recommendations.

I know that some concerns remain about the progress that St Peter's needs to make, with Ofsted highlighting key areas that need to be addressed, including careers guidance and pupil assessment. However, the school now appears to have turned a corner following the visit that Ofsted inspectors made last year. A new leadership is in place, safeguarding procedures have been strengthened and efforts have been made to improve school buildings and clean them. Perhaps most important, all staff in the school have now been subject to an enhanced CRB check to confirm their suitability to work with children.

I am sure that much of that is down to my hon. Friend's hard work and persistence. Like her, the Government set the bar at nothing less than absolutely parity of safety and well-being for every child in this country. That applies not only to those from disadvantaged backgrounds or from poorer areas. It applies to all children, from all walks of life, at all schools.

Question put and agreed to.

6.22 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Monday 8 June 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Community Sport

1. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the recession on community sports groups and clubs. [278188]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): My Department is monitoring the potential impact of the recession on all its sectors. It recently published "Lifting People, Lifting Places", which sets out the role that sport can play in lifting our communities. Our most recent figures show that participation is holding up well, and we remain on track with our ambition to ensure that 1 million more people engage in sport regularly.

Andrew Rosindell: Since 1997, grass-roots funding for community sports has been reduced from £397 million to £209 million. What impact does the Minister expect that to have on the efforts of British sportsmen and sportswomen to succeed in the 2012 London Olympics?

Mr. Sutcliffe: The hon. Gentleman, whom I respect, has got his figures completely wrong. Nearly £5 billion has been invested in sport over the past 12 years, and it can be shown that every sport and every area of sport has been very successful. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to tell me which sports have not been successful, at community or at school level, I shall be happy to discuss that with him.

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): The Minister recently gave us an assurance about the future of the English Institute of Sport facility at Gateshead stadium, in the context of UK Sport's announcement of changes in the way in which it would fund local sports clubs. In the light of the recession, can he give us a further assurance today that that valuable project will not be put in jeopardy?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am grateful for the work that my hon. Friend has been doing for sport in the north-east. I am happy to confirm that the English Institute of Sport will have a presence in the region, and will continue to invest in it. I shall be happy to meet him, and to establish what progress is being made. I know that a number of outstanding issues need to be tidied up.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Perhaps the Minister could suggest to local authorities throughout the country—they are all Tory controlled now, and very receptive—that they make available facilities in schools and colleges, such as playing fields, at reduced prices, if not free, to encourage community groups to continue to take part in the sport that they enjoy, particularly at this time of deep recession.

Mr. Sutcliffe: It is vital for us to try to ensure that 1 million more people become active in sport, and I agree that local authorities have a major role to play in that. I know that they are happy to work with the Government, as they did in the case of free swimming. More than 80 per cent. of councils now offer free swimming to the over-60s, and 60 per cent. offer it to the under-60s. Some Conservative councils did not participate then, but I hope that they will do so now.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating all who were involved in establishing the boxing centre of excellence in Gorton, which provides facilities for boys, girls and people with disabilities? It already has a amateur boxing club with 100 members, and is part of a £200 million educational complex in Gorton. None of that would ever have happened without this Labour Government.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am delighted to agree with my right hon. Friend, and I congratulate him on the work that he has done to support boxing in his constituency. We are trying to ensure that boxing facilities are available to all who want to take part, not just for the physical contact but for the fitness that can be acquired through boxing, and the self-respect that it teaches. I shall be happy to support the initiative in Gorton, and I should like to see more boxing in our schools and communities throughout the country.

Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Sports clubs undoubtedly make an invaluable contribution to our local communities, yet they continue to be swamped by regulations and bureaucracy. What more can the Government do to ease that bureaucracy and regulation, so that clubs do not go under during this difficult recession?

Mr. Sutcliffe: There are a number of ways in which we can help and are helping. We want to support clubs that apply for community amateur sports club status, with all the benefits that that gives them. We are also looking at water charges around the country, which have caused problems for clubs. We want sport to be firmly at the heart of what we are trying to achieve, because all of us—Members throughout the House—are aware of the benefits it provides for our communities.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the excellent CASC scheme, which the Government introduced in 2002. It has helped sports clubs in areas throughout the country, including Newcastle-under-Lyme. As he will know, in November 2007 we wanted the Government to go a little further and extend gift aid to junior subscriptions. There was a "subs for clubs" campaign. What recent discussions has he had with the Treasury about that proposal?

Mr. Sutcliffe: We try to ensure that we support our clubs in any way possible. However, my hon. Friend is right to raise that issue, and we have raised it with the Treasury. As he is aware, tax-related matters are for the Treasury, but we will continue to try to persuade it that it should be supporting clubs.

As my hon. Friend will know, we are considering what further support we can provide. The other week, the Department for Work and Pensions announced that a further 5,000 young people would be given the opportunity to become coaches and to be involved in employment. I believe that we are doing all that we can to deliver and develop sport.

"Digital Britain"

2. **Paul Rowen** (Rochdale) (LD): What plans his Department has to take forward the recommendations contained in the interim "Digital Britain" report published in January 2009. [278189]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): Since the publication of the interim "Digital Britain" report in January there has been extensive consultation, and we will publish the final report shortly.

Paul Rowen: I welcome the Secretary of State to his new position, and I am sure he will do a very good job. I am also sure that he is aware that the "Digital Britain" report raises concerns about, and makes recommendations on, the future of regional news and regional content. Does he not agree that reallocating the money currently used for implementing digital TV would be one way of ensuring that the regions continue to get regional news and programme content on independent television?

Mr. Bradshaw: I think that every Member of the House values the role played by regional news and acknowledges the importance of some competition and plurality of provision in regional news. The hon. Gentleman is right: this is one of the important issues that will be addressed when we publish the final report, and I invite him to be patient a little longer.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment; it is an excellent appointment and I wish him well in his post.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Give him a job.

Mr. Watson: Yes, third time lucky.

Will my hon. Friend ensure that "Digital Britain" takes heed of the interests of the very successful UK video games industry? Video games make their players think, and they challenge them and make them focus, and many people in Britain believe that a medium that does that should be elevated to an art form. I hope my hon. Friend's Department gives the video games industry a similar status to that of the UK music and film industries.

Mr. Bradshaw: I assure my hon. Friend that we do recognise the importance of the video games industry to the British economy. Research and development tax credits are available for the industry, and we are looking at introducing further tax breaks. We will deal with the issue of classification, and other announcements that will, I think, please my hon. Friend will form part of the final report.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on taking on one of the best jobs in government. He will have already discovered, however, that he has a very full in-tray, and one of the most pressing problems he faces is the need to tackle online piracy. While I welcome the proposals in "Digital Britain", does he agree that the best way forward is to press internet service providers to adopt a graduated response against offenders, rather than expect content providers to sue every offender in the courts?

Mr. Bradshaw: I certainly agree that it is important that content providers work with all the other interested parties in addressing this problem. As part of our "Digital Britain" final report, we intend to ensure that that happens, and I think the hon. Gentleman will be reassured by the proposals that we expect to make. He is right that piracy is a serious issue, particularly for the creative talent of this country, given the revenue that is lost as a result of the practice.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): May I also welcome my hon. and, I hope, personal Friend to his new post and say how pleasing it is to see a new Secretary of State sitting in the House of Commons? The BBC lies at the heart of the "Digital Britain" issue, of course. I do not know whether my hon. Friend heard the Public Accounts Committee Chairman trying last week gently to persuade Mr. John Humphrys to reveal how much he was paid by the public. Mr. Humphrys refused—so some people know how to keep secrets. When a Bill is introduced, will my hon. Friend add a clause obliging the BBC to be subject to the full rigour of the Freedom of Information Act so that we can know everything about pay, allowances and expenses for all areas of BBC employment, including its presenters?

Mr. Bradshaw: As a co-former BBC employee, I am sure my right hon. Friend shares my admiration for the BBC as an organisation. The question he asks is, of course, for the BBC, but perhaps I can reassure him by saying that I believe that when the public pay for something through their taxes—or, in this case, the licence fee—they expect transparency and accountability, and I think they are right to have that expectation.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State to his new post. Having already praised the BBC from the Dispatch Box, does he agree that "Digital Britain" provides a golden opportunity to sort out an anomaly in the regulation of the BBC's charter? Is it not ludicrous that the BBC Trust remains within the BBC, so that on the one hand it is a flag waver for the BBC on issues such as the licence fee and on the other hand it is a supposedly independent regulator on issues such as "Canvas"? Would it not be better to see if we can develop an independent regulatory body for all our public service broadcasters?

Mr. Bradshaw: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern—which other Members have expressed—about the fact that the trust acts as cheerleader and regulator

of the BBC. I hope he would not expect me to announce Government policy on the hoof, but I can say that I envisage that we will address this issue in the final report. I am, of course, happy to consider his views, which are, by and large, usually very sensible, and to continue to have a dialogue with him about this issue in the weeks to come.

Mr. Jeremy Hunt (South-West Surrey) (Con): May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on taking up his post? He is the fourth Culture Secretary in less than two years. In fairness, he has had only two days to prepare for today's questions, so he has the support of the whole House, particularly today.

One of the crucial issues for the "Digital Britain" report is how to preserve impartiality in a digital era. Does the Secretary of State believe that Sir Alan Sugar can combine his role as host of Britain's most popular business TV programme with his new job as the Government's enterprise champion, whereby he will sit in the House of Lords, taking the Labour Whip?

Mr. Bradshaw: I know that the hon. Gentleman has written to the BBC Trust to express his concerns and I should be interested to see a copy of its reply, if he sends me one. On the face of it, I do not see a conflict of interest; my memory of the BBC producer guidelines is that they were very clear about people who were involved in political programming not doing political jobs, and I recall that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) presented a jazz programme without there being any suggestion of a conflict of interest. This is a matter for the BBC. I understand that Sir Alan discussed it with the BBC before this decision was taken, that he is not being paid and that all his business interests are being put at arm's length. We will have to wait to see how the trust responds to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hunt: I urge the Secretary of State to examine this arrangement closely, because someone having their own weekly TV programme at the same time as being one of the main ambassadors for Government policy in precisely the same area is unprecedented. If there is a general election in June 2010, according to the current schedules "The Apprentice" will be shown during the campaign. Would it be right for the BBC to carry on screening "The Apprentice" in that period, given that its main star is a principal advocate of Government business policy?

Mr. Bradshaw: As I said, these are matters for the BBC. The hon. Gentleman will have a robust exchange with the BBC about them. I have just explained that I am prepared to criticise the BBC where I think it has made a mistake. If he were to examine my record on the Gilligan scandal and on the Hutton inquiry, and my comments after the BBC's failure to publish the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal, he would find that I am not backward in coming forward to criticise the BBC where I think that the criticism is justified. This is an issue for the BBC, and I shall be interested to see how it responds to his letter.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): Let us hope that the Secretary of State does not hear the words, "You're fired." We know that the digital money underspend is crucial to regional news and current affairs programmes, so will he make sure that it is given to the ITV network, ensuring that we have regional news in the north-west and across the other regions? Without it, the BBC will not have the competition it needs to ensure that quality and impartiality in news programmes.

Mr. Bradshaw: My hon. Friend is right to mention the importance of sustaining a plurality of provision in regional news. However, I do not think it sensible at this stage to narrow the options for ensuring that. He advocates one position, but there might be others to consider. Whatever happens, I assure him that we will address the importance of regional news provision, its continuity and its plurality when we publish the final report.

Digital Switchover (South-West)

3. **Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): What his most recent assessment is of progress towards digital switchover in the south-west. [278190]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): Switchover is on track in the south-west: viewers served by the Beacon hill and Stockland hill transmitter groups have now successfully switched, and other parts of the region will switch between July and September. Three months away from the remaining south-west switchovers, 97 per cent. of residents are aware of switchover and 96 per cent. of homes already have access to digital TV on their main sets.

Linda Gilroy: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to an area that is so important in Plymouth, Exeter, the rest of Devon and Cornwall; I am sure that their media industries will look forward to his contribution as Secretary of State. On digital switchover, does have confidence that when it comes to the turn of the Caradon hill transmitter, which serves Plymouth, things will go as smoothly as they have done thus far? What is his assessment of how far the help scheme is reaching out to the people it needs to help?

Mr. Bradshaw: As I understand it, Plymouth will begin to switch on 12 August, with the Caradon hill transmitter, and will conclude on 9 September. We believe that we are prepared, as are viewers across the region. Leaflets have been sent to every home, and there have been television, radio and press adverts. As my hon. Friend will know, people are eligible for help if they are over 75, registered blind or receive certain allowances or benefits. In total, 300,000 eligible people will be offered help in the old ITV West Country region. So far, we are aware of 26,000 people requesting help.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): May I join the general acclamation of the Secretary of State's appointment and wish him every success in dealing with his crowded in-tray? One of the complex issues that he has to confront is the consequence of digital switchover and the release of spectrum that flows from that programme in the south-west and elsewhere. Will he pay particular attention to the consequences for the programme making and special events sector, and the continued viability of radio microphones for broadcasting entertainment and a wide variety of other purposes?

Mr. Bradshaw: I will be happy to look into the points that the hon. Gentleman raises. As the hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mr. Hunt) said, I have had only two days to get on top of the issues, so I hope that the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) will forgive me if I am not on top of every detail. I will ensure that I look into the one that he raises.

Anne Snelgrove (South Swindon) (Lab): May I also add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend? He was a superb regional Minister and I was proud to be his deputy. All of us in the south-west are delighted to see him elevated to the Cabinet.

He may be aware of an issue in Swindon that I have raised with several of his predecessors—the digital switchover for the railway village. It is one of the poorest communities in Swindon and a conservation area, and the switchover faces extreme difficulties. Will he look into that?

Mr. Bradshaw: I will happily do that. May I also use this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for her assistance in her role as assistant regional Minister?

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State. May I say how welcome it is that we may now expect a large dose of culture in DCMS? Will he look at the situation in Salisbury and south Wiltshire, one of the last switchover stations? Is there any hope of accelerating digital switchover for people in rural communities who depend on it more than other people for any possibility of choice and diversity?

Mr. Bradshaw: Again, I will happily look into the situation in Salisbury and the rural areas of Wiltshire that the hon. Gentleman mentions, and I will write to him.

Sport (North-West)

4. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): How much funding he plans to provide for sport in the north-west in 2009-10. [278191]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): The majority of UK Sport and Sport England funding is allocated to organisations such as national governing bodies rather than regionally. It is used to deliver the Government's key sporting objectives across the country, including in the north-west. Specific grants benefiting the north-west this year include more than £10 million of Exchequer funding for county sports partnerships and the English Institute of Sport in the region, and more than £1 million of UK Sport Lottery funding for major events, including the Paralympic World cup.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: The Minister will know that the previous Conservative Government set up the lottery with provision for grass-roots sports as one of its primary good causes. The sport industry in the north-west makes up 1.5 per cent. of the area's economy, but—in my experience recently—ever-decreasing funds are dedicated to grass-roots sports. What may my constituents expect in sport funding for 2009-10? This is important, because grass-roots sport is critical.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his involvement in sport. I remember as a new Member discussing with him sport in Macclesfield, many years ago. I do not accept that there has been a reduction in funding for grass-roots sport—indeed, the opposite is true. In schools, we are trying to bring the two-hour offer up to five hours and encouraging sports clubs to work with schools, to try to bring them together to increase the number of young people taking part. We have also seen an increase in the number of girls taking part in sport at all levels. I also mentioned to the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) the investment of more than £5 billion in the last 12 years. Rather than seeing a reduction in funding for community sports, we have seen a three-fold increase. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) will also be aware of the funding available not only through the governing bodies, but through Sport England's rural and innovation funds. Many of the clubs that he mentions will be able to take advantage of that funding.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): We heard earlier how receptive councils will be to the Minister's advice and views on developing and enabling sport. Will he give advice to local education authorities in the north-west and elsewhere, such as Essex county council, that they should not sell off school playing fields, such as the field at Castle View school in Canvey Island, for development, but should retain those school fields for sport?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will know that over the past 12 years we have safeguarded school playing fields, ensuring that they cannot be sold without procedures being followed and without Sport England being involved. There is a debate about playing fields as opposed to the provision of indoor sports facilities, which I accept. Our record shows that we have stopped the sell-off of playing fields that happened under the previous Government. We want to see more world-class facilities available to everybody.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent) (Con): One of the most successful funders of sport in the north-west, not mentioned by the Minister, is, of course, the Football Foundation. There were reports last week that the Football Association intends to cut the grant it gives the Football Foundation by approximately 15 per cent., or at least £2 million each year. Incidentally, that contradicts all the assurances that we were given as part of the 2018 World cup launch last week, which the Minister and I attended together. Given that the Government are the FA's funding partner for the Football Foundation, may I ask the Minister whether he agrees with this policy? If not, as I suspect, what is he doing to stop it?

Mr. Sutcliffe: At a meeting of the Football Foundation board, the issue was raised of the potential reduction in funding to grassroots sports. It is not something that I would be very happy about. I am told that it is only a proposal at this stage, but the hon.Gentleman is quite right to raise it and I shall be raising it with the FA as soon as possible

Cricket

5. **Tony Baldry** (Banbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage young people to play cricket; and if he will make a statement. [278192]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): Through the PE and school sport strategy, £1.5 billion was invested in the five years to 2008. A further £783 million has been committed for the next three years. That has already helped to ensure that 90 per cent. of schools now provide cricket to their pupils. The "chance to shine" programme has also played a significant part in bringing the sport to young people, with 20,000 sessions delivered across 2,000 schools in 2008. In addition, Sport England has awarded nearly £38 million over the next four years to the cricket programmes.

Tony Baldry: The cricket board's "chance to shine" programme is an excellent initiative, but it is able to get into only about a third of all state schools. Of the competitive matches it has organised, only a tiny percentage—about 4 per cent.—are played with cricket balls. How on earth are we going to beat the Windies, India and Australia in the future when so few youngsters are playing competitive cricket and when, of those who are playing competitive cricket, only a tiny proportion are learning to play with cricket balls?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern. I had the misfortune to be at Lord's on Friday to see England being beaten by Holland. Thankfully, England managed to rectify the situation against Pakistan yesterday. I think that the hon. Gentleman is right, and what we are trying to do with the investment—cricket gets the biggest investment of Sport England money—is to ensure that we have the best coaches and the best opportunities, particularly for school children. We are trying to get school children and the clubs together to ensure that that coaching continues. The way in which that coaching is provided is surely a matter for the England and Wales Cricket Board and not for the Government.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): In inspiring young people to take up cricket, is it not a great shame that alone of the major sports there is no live coverage of it on free-to-air TV, particularly in a summer when there are the Ashes and the Twenty20 world cup? Is this not something that the David Davies review of listed events should consider seriously?

Mr. Sutcliffe: Certainly. I congratulate my hon. Friend, who is a keen supporter not only of men's cricket but of women's cricket. He will congratulate the England women's team that won the Ashes in Australia and will hopefully do very well in the world cup that is now taking place. We asked the David Davies review of listed events to ensure that we look at all the things that need to be considered. When that report comes to us shortly, the Secretary of State and I will make recommendations, which will then go out to consultation.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if cricket is to flourish, particularly in state schools, we need close links with clubs and a commitment from teachers to stay on after hours to coach and take teams? What discussions has he held with his colleagues in other Departments to make sure that those people are able to commit their time?

Mr. Sutcliffe: One of the good things about sport is that we work with colleagues right across Government—whether it is cricket or swimming, we are showing the impact that sport can have on other programmes for individual development. Specifically on cricket, the increase in school sport from two hours to five hours can be delivered only by clubs working closely with schools. Yes, PE teachers, and teachers, are important, but we also have specialist sports colleges and competition managers in schools. We need to encourage more coaches at different levels. We certainly want volunteer coaches, but we also want coaches for specific sports, including cricket, which is why we set up investment to offer 5,000 young people the opportunity to become cricket coaches.

Mr. Brian Jenkins (Tamworth) (Lab): The Minister realises of course that for young people to play cricket there must be cricket clubs. What advice can he give Wilnecote sports and social club, which runs two teams, but is suffering from a high level of vandalism and needs £20,000 to build a perimeter defence to reduce it? The club has made applications to our local council, which has reserves of 200 per cent. in its annual budget but refuses to pass on to local clubs the money the Government have sent down. Of course, it is a Conservative local authority. What advice can my hon. Friend give?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I hope the local authority will support its local sports clubs. Whether it is cricket, football, rugby or hockey, the role of the local sports club in our communities is vital. Clubs do work that is usually unpaid and usually done by volunteers, but the impact on our communities is large. The amount of vandalism we see in many sports fields and clubs is regrettable. Sometimes, volunteers are sickened by the mindless vandalism that takes place. If my hon. Friend needs my assistance to speak to the local authority about the specific case he raises, I am happy to provide it. The authority should understand the significant contribution that the local club is making.

Historic Environment

7. **Richard Younger-Ross** (Teignbridge) (LD): When he plans to introduce the new planning policy statement on the historic environment; and if he will make a statement. [278194]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Barbara Follett): The new planning policy statement will be published in draft this summer and consulted on immediately afterwards, with a view to its coming into force early next year. I know that the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) will now take me to task because I promised that it would be available by Easter, but we believe that it is important to get it right.

Richard Younger-Ross: I thank the Minister for her reply, but does she not appreciate that there is some urgency about not only the reforms and proposals on the PPS, but also the Heritage Protection Bill that the Government should have brought in last year but did not? There is a whole swathe of legislation that we were told would be brought in because we did not need primary legislation, such as reform of secondary legislation to deal with the Shimizu judgment, the heritage partnership

agreement, the guidance for investment in and promotion of historic environment records and improved protection for world heritage sites. When will those matters be dealt with?

Barbara Follett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and I appreciate his concern. My Department and I have been working with heritage groups to address exactly the matters he has raised, not all of which need primary legislation. I should be happy to copy him into the work we are doing in those areas.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Would the Minister be kind enough to tell the new Secretary of State—I welcome him warmly—that one of the biggest disappointments in his excellent predecessor was that he did not bring in the heritage Bill? May we have some real action on that now? There is plenty of parliamentary time.

Barbara Follett: I share the hon. Gentleman's disappointment and the disappointment felt in the whole House about that; we argued with L Committee and fought for the Bill and I shall continue to do what I can to advance heritage protection. I know that my about-to-be right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will do the same.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government have been short-sighted, mean-spirited and lacking in vision on their duty of care towards the maintenance of the royal palaces? At what stage will the Government agree to play their part in maintaining those vital historic places?

Barbara Follett: I am afraid that I cannot possibly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I know that the predecessor of my about-to-be right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had a meeting with representatives from the royal palaces last week, and I will follow the matter up with the new Secretary of State.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): What progress has been made in resolving the various disputes about the options for development close to, and around, Stonehenge?

Barbara Follett: We are making quite a few advances on the issue. We have decided that the new visitors' centre will be at Airman's Corner.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath) (LD): At last!

Barbara Follett: As the hon. Gentleman says, at last we have agreement. As he will confirm, we are beginning the work.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am flattered that the Minister knew that I would intervene on this question—and, indeed, knew that one of the things for which I would take her to task was the fact that the planning policy statement has been delayed since Easter. Was she also aware that I would take her to task for the fact that the Government have cut £100 million from the heritage budget over the past 10 years? Was she aware that, like my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Patrick Cormack), I would invite her to ask the new Secretary of State, whom we all welcome to his new position, to speak to the Prime Minister, so that we can bring forward a heritage protection Bill that has the support of all parties in this House? It would have the added benefit of giving a Government who are currently focused on their own preservation something else to focus on.

Barbara Follett: I am glad that I can read the hon. Gentleman's mind. Like him, I am extremely concerned about conserving our heritage, not least because I am Minister for tourism, and people come to look at our marvellous and unique heritage. I will work with the new Secretary of State on that. I realise that there have been cuts, but I ask the hon. Gentleman to pause and consider what his own party has promised in the way of cuts, and what he would do with heritage if those cuts were made.

Museum and Gallery Admissions

8. **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on visitor numbers of free access to national museums and galleries; and if he will make a statement. [278195]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Barbara Follett): Visits to national museums and galleries are at a record high for the third year running, with more than 40.3 million such visits recorded last year. Since the Government introduced the free admission policy in 2001, visits to previously charging museums have more than doubled, from 7.2 million eight years ago to 16 million last year.

Mr. Crausby: On Friday my grandson Charlie enjoyed the delights of Bolton's excellent free aquarium and museum. Does my hon. Friend agree that the pleasure of museums should not be confined just to rich children, any more than membership of this House should be confined to rich adults?

Barbara Follett: I could not agree more. It is wonderful to see grandchildren enjoying the museums that the Government have made free; I have taken my own grandchildren to them.

Topical Questions

T3. [278212] **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): My Department's responsibilities are set out in our website. They have an important part to play in sustaining and boosting Britain's economy, helping define our national identity and improving people's health and well-being. I look forward to working with my ministerial colleagues and Members in all parts of the House to continue to maximise the public good of the arts, culture more generally, sport and media in all our lives.

Lyn Brown: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new position. He may be aware that I chair the all-party group on libraries, literacy and information management, which is undertaking a review of the strategic leadership

of our public libraries sector. May I ask him to honour his predecessor's commitment and come before the group to give us a strategic view on the leadership of that important public service, especially in the light of the anger expressed about closures and the failing services evident in the country?

Mr. Bradshaw: I share my hon. Friend's concern for the future of libraries and recognition of their importance. I will be happy to meet her and her all-party group. She may, though, wish to reflect on the fact that I might be able to give her a better strategic view when I have had a little more time to settle into the job.

T5. [278219] **Mr. Edward Timpson** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that participation in local cultural activities, such as the Lyceum theatre and Crewe carnival in my constituency, helps strengthen society and community cohesion and should be supported, wherever possible, across national and local government, as well as our public services?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Barbara Follett): I thoroughly agree with the hon. Gentleman. Such participation increases not only cohesion but well-being, and something that is in rather short supply at present—happiness.

T6. [278216] **David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that any relaxation of media ownership rules should be accompanied by a strengthened public interest test to ensure that in the event of media mergers, the resources devoted to journalism and news gathering are not diluted or weakened?

Mr. Bradshaw: That is certainly something that we shall have to think about carefully as we address the problem of regional news and the merger and acquisitions legislation in the context of the very difficult times that some of our excellent local and regional newspapers are going through. Members in all parts of the House recognise and value the role played by regional and local newspapers not only in informing the public in their local areas, but in holding us and locally elected officials to account. It would be very sad to see the demise of local and regional newspapers.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Now that the appalling system of proportional representation has, predictably, led to the election of two neo-Nazis from the British National party to the European Parliament, does the Secretary of State agree that this raises serious issues for the concept of due impartiality on the part of the BBC and independent television when reporting political matters? What conversations does he propose to have with the broadcasting authorities to ensure that appropriate fairness does not mean a platform to spout racist and other unacceptable views?

Mr. Bradshaw: Although we agree on many things, the hon. Gentleman and I do not agree on a fairer voting system. I point out to him that in Germany, Italy and a number of other countries that have a more proportional system, that has not resulted in extreme right-wing parties being elected to the Bundestag or the Italian Parliament. I am sure the broadcasters will take their duties under the impartiality rules extremely seriously, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that what happened yesterday poses a dilemma for them. My own view is that usually, when one gives those people a platform, they condemn themselves out of their own mouths.

Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Given his immediate past responsibilities, I am sure the new Secretary of State will be aware of the benefits of audio description for elderly people and people with poor eyesight. Will he take the opportunity to build on the excellent work undertaken by his predecessor in promoting the availability of set-top boxes with one-button click to audio description for elderly people generally, throughout the community?

Mr. Bradshaw: I shall look into the issue that my right hon. Friend raises. As I am sure he is aware, audio description is now a mandatory requirement for the equipment provided as the standard offer under the digital switchover scheme, and blind and partially sighted people are also eligible for help with the scheme. I assure him that I will also look into the particular issue that he raises about the single switch.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion. Will he join me in congratulating the Royal Shakespeare Company on its new production of "Julius Caesar" at Stratford upon Avon—a play full of deceit, lies, gossip, intrigue and assassins, but assassins with sharp knives not blunted knives? Will he tell the House what lessons can be drawn from Shakespeare, particularly from plays such as "Julius Caesar", for the modern world?

Mr. Bradshaw: What I can say is that, having had to almost give up my cultural life over the past few years, I am looking forward, in this job, to spending a bit more time in the theatre in order to reacquaint myself with the lessons for our modern politics to be found in the great man's works.

T7. [278217] **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East) (Lab): Free swimming has been great in the authorities that have introduced it, but it is not much use to someone who cannot swim. Bolton council has introduced free swimming lessons during the school holidays, and that has been terrifically successful, so will my hon. Friend take a lesson from Bolton and introduce free classes throughout the country so that my other grandchildren, Poppy, Gabriel and Thomas, can learn to swim for England?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): We are happy to look after my hon. Friend's grandchildren for their cultural and sporting activities—but he raises a fair point. It was important to us to ensure that the whole country supported free swimming, and more than 80 per cent. of councils have introduced it for the over 60s, while 60 per cent. have done so for the under-16s. A significant part of that activity is school swimming lessons, and we have been speaking to the sport's governing bodies to find better ways to try to ensure that we have enough coaches to teach swimming. That is an important and integral part of what we are trying to achieve. It is one of the successes of this Government, working in conjunction with local authorities, that we have built up free swimming to its current level.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Like the hon. Member for Bolton, North-East (Mr. Crausby), I have grandchildren—eight, actually—[HON. MEMBERS: "Name them."] I could, but it would take a little time. Some of my grandchildren are already swimmers. Following up the hon. Gentleman's question, my question to the appropriate Minister is, does he not think that local authorities should be encouraged to give a substantial discount on the hire of a leisure centre swimming pool to amateur clubs that spend a great deal of time and effort on teaching young people to swim—and particularly, to a club in Macclesfield, which provides teaching for people with disabilities? Should we not encourage those clubs by giving them a discount that would enable them to hire the pool more easily without spending so much time raising money?

Mr. Sutcliffe: I hope that we will now see that progression in terms of local authorities working in their communities and with different partners, both public and private, on the provision of swimming. A great opportunity exists, and I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised the subject of people with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities, having the opportunity to become involved in sport in the same way as everybody else. I do believe that we should look at ways in which the governing bodies can be creative in supporting clubs through the club structure, which comes under the governing bodies, and in working with local government. That is why the money has gone through the governing body process. I am also pleased that many local authorities now use sport as a performance indicator. I believe that that progression will develop, and I hope that it will develop in Macclesfield as well.

Martin Linton (Battersea) (Lab): As a part of the new Secretary of State's programme for refreshing his interest in the arts, may I invite him to visit Battersea Arts Centre? It pioneered the first "pay what you can" scheme, which still runs on Tuesday evenings, and, under the Government's free theatre initiative, has now given away more than 630 tickets to local young people in Wandsworth. My right hon. Friend will be able to see two schemes that have already spun off that initiative—"A Night Less Ordinary", which brings together all the London theatres that put on cutting-edge new work, and BAC's young critics review, which has engendered huge enthusiasm in young people and now been taken over by Arts Council England.

Mr. Bradshaw: I shall be happy to visit my hon. Friend's local arts centre, if I can squeeze that into my diary. I understand that until recently it was under threat of closure by his local Conservative borough council. He may also like to know that although we do not yet have the official figures for the free theatre tickets scheme, the anecdotal evidence is very encouraging: the Royal Shakespeare Company, which has already been referred to, has already allocated almost 1,700 tickets for its summer season in Stratford-on-Avon; the West Yorkshire Playhouse has issued more than 1,000 tickets, 87 per cent. of which have gone to young people who are new bookers, who have not been to the theatre before; the scheme's website has received more than 360,000 unique visits; and, there are now 3,500 members of its Facebook group—one of the other Facebook groups that I shall have to join.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to congratulate Burton Latimer library in my constituency on proving to be an increasingly popular local library resource, and on using ever more innovative ways to encourage local community participation?

Barbara Follett: Both the Secretary of State and I would like to congratulate the staff at that library in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. As the Minister for the region, I know what good work is being done in libraries in Kettering.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I am told that the national skills academy for creative and cultural skills, which is to be co-located with the Royal Opera House project in Thurrock, is in jeopardy because of the bureaucracy involved in getting the necessary funding from the Arts Council and the regional development agency. My hon. Friend is the Minister for the East of England as well as being at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Can she assure me from the Dispatch Box today that the inertia will be broken through and that the funding will be obtained? Jobs are in jeopardy and the situation is jeopardising some of the Government's other strategies for the Thames Gateway. Furthermore, we want the investment for cultural and economic reasons. What is the hold-up? Will my hon. Friend please say what she will do about it?

Barbara Follett: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue. The Royal Opera House is to move its scenery operations and some of its rehearsals base to Thurrock. Its work there and the national skills academy's work at the Royal Opera House are vital. We are working to resolve the hold-up involving the money; I am working on the issue both as Minister for the East of England and as a Minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Andrew Mackinlay: Tell them I raised it this afternoon.

Barbara Follett: I will indeed.

OLYMPICS

The Minister for the Olympics was asked—

Apprenticeships

1. **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): How many (a) apprenticeships and (b) other training opportunities she estimates will be available on the main Olympic site. [278218]

The Minister for the Olympics (Tessa Jowell) *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Still here?

Tessa Jowell: I certainly am.

In January this year the Olympic Delivery Authority announced that an additional 250 apprenticeships would be created on the Olympic park, bringing the total number of apprenticeships there to 350. That will be achieved in a number of ways. Critically, the ODA will mandate that apprentices should make up 3 per cent. of project work forces for the remaining £500 million

worth of contracts that are still to be tendered for; it is worth underlining the fact that that level of apprenticeship investment represents three times the industry average for London and the south-east. It increases the ODA's overall target for trainees, apprentices and work placements to 2,250. That is an important and ambitious target in ensuring that the legacy of the Olympics will be a local population that is more skilled and qualified to stay in work.

Lyn Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and for the Government's continuing commitment to providing apprenticeships and training on the Olympic site. However, given that the Olympics are a fairly time-limited project, and that Crossrail and the development along the lower Lea valley is coming up, will she assure me that the apprenticeships and training opportunities currently provided on the Olympic site will be rolled out into those new development and construction opportunities?

Tessa Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend. I should like to place on the record my recognition and gratitude to her, and other Members with constituencies in the Olympic borough, for their advocacy for this level of investment in apprenticeships and skills. I give her the assurance that she seeks. The skills academy, which is currently training apprentices for the Olympic park, will continue its work. London's construction industry is an ageing one. We are recruiting new young apprentices who will be able to transfer to other major infrastructure projects such as the Crossrail programme, on which construction is to start shortly; that is another example of the Olympic legacy.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): How satisfied is the Minister about the security clearance and immigration status of all the apprentices and everyone else working on the Olympic site?

Tessa Jowell: I assure the hon. Gentleman that, as the Border and Immigration Agency is embedded in the Olympic Delivery Authority, regular checks are undertaken to ensure that not only apprentices but everybody who works in the Olympic park is entitled to do so.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome what the Minister says about apprenticeships. However, the depressing news of the election of two BNP members underlines the importance of targeting apprenticeships, training and employment opportunities on the main Olympic site at local people. Does the Minister regret that there has been a drop in the proportion of local people employed on the Olympic park, can she confirm whether there has been a similar drop in the number of apprentices and trainees from the local area, and what action is she taking to redress that problem?

Tessa Jowell: The hon. Gentleman is correct that the recent figures show a reduction from 23 per cent. to 20 per cent. in the proportion of local people working in the park, but he should also recognise that the actual numbers of local people working there have increased. In fact, when I looked at the apprenticeship figures, I saw that they mirrored that. About 20 per cent. of young apprentices are from local boroughs, but 50 per cent. are from London. The five Olympic boroughs are among the most diverse communities in London. They are optimistic and committed to the Olympics, and in everything they do as part of the Olympics they are a powerful argument against the hatred and racism of the BNP.

Contracts (Scottish Companies)

2. **Mark Lazarowicz** (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): What percentage of contracts for the London 2012 Olympics have been awarded to companies in Scotland. [278219]

Tessa Jowell: Just over 2,000 businesses registered in Scotland have registered on the CompeteFor network. To date, 13 businesses registered in Scotland have been awarded contracts by the Olympic Delivery Authority, which is 1.4 per cent. of the total number awarded. However, those figures do not include subcontractors, of which Scottish Enterprise, which is doing an extremely good and vigorous job in selling the potential of Olympic contracts, recognises another 15, with more to come. Of those, two contracts were awarded to suppliers registered on the CompeteFor network. In order to continue to press the business opportunities not only at the construction phase but beyond, the ODA has hosted events in Glasgow, Dunfermline and Edinburgh to ensure that all local businesses in those areas, and across Scotland, are aware of the commercial benefits that they can gain from the Olympics.

Mark Lazarowicz: I welcome what my right hon. Friend says. Indeed, I know that businesses in my own constituency have won contracts from the ODA. However, may I invite her to speak to the Scottish Government to urge them to play a more active role in encouraging businesses in Scotland to take opportunities provided by the Olympics in London? I am afraid that their record has not been very good as regards co-operation with the UK Government, and I urge her to speak to them to ensure that they redouble their efforts to try to get businesses in Scotland to take full advantage of the opportunities arising from the Olympics in 2012.

Tessa Jowell: Yes, I am happy to do that. Indeed, I hope that the message goes right round the country that the contracts that will be let are commercial and business opportunities, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses, not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The Minister has given some rather disappointing figures. I would not wish in any way to take anything away from London—and neither, I am sure, would she, as a fellow London Member. However, it is important to recognise that these are national games, and we would not wish any part of the United Kingdom to miss out. In the run-up phase beyond the construction phase, which she rightly mentions, can she ensure that we do more to promote the national element of the games? Particularly given the cost and the controversy that has surrounded the London Olympics, nothing would be worse than to give the impression that they are just for the capital city, because they are something of which everyone in the UK should be proud.

Tessa Jowell: The hon. Gentleman should accept that every Member in this House can have a responsibility in that respect. Every day I make the point that these are the UK's games in London. That is why we have been so successful in ensuring that about half the contracts for the construction of the Olympic park go to businesses outside London. The advocacy of Government is one part of delivering this sense of shared opportunity, but the initiative can also be taken by Members of Parliament, local chambers of commerce, small business support services and so forth. All around the country the opportunities are there to be seized. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we must be able to show at every turn that these are the UK's games in London.

Construction Programme

4. **Stephen Pound** (Ealing, North) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on the construction programme for the London 2012 Olympics. [278221]

Tessa Jowell *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): Give him a job!

Tessa Jowell: Any day.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Stephen Pound) for his question. All the major venues on the Olympic park are either on schedule or ahead of schedule. *[Interruption].* I thought that he would like some good news today. The International Olympic Committee's co-ordination committee, during its visit in April, described progress to date as "nothing short of astounding". We will be very happy to facilitate a visit to the Olympic park for any Member.

Some 34.1 per cent. of the Olympic Delivery Authority's programme is now complete. Construction has now commenced on all five major venues, and construction of the Olympic stadium is now one year in and remains ahead of schedule. Excellent progress is being made on the aquatics centre, and the roof that will form the gateway to the games is already taking shape in the skyline. Construction has also begun on the international broadcast centre, the main press centre and the velodrome.

Stephen Pound: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. During the riotous celebrations that followed Labour's victory over the Conservatives in Ealing last night, my thoughts naturally turned to the Olympic construction programme. Ealing is an olympian borough, if not an Olympic one, and we are acutely conscious of the legacy of the infrastructure that she is building. Will she please keep foremost in her mind the fact that future generations, including generations unborn, will look to the physical legacy of the Olympics to progress Britain's sporting supremacy?

Tessa Jowell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Additional money is being invested in the legacy purposes of all the Olympic venues, so that they will be the preferred training place for young people and local communities for many years to come.

Hugh Robertson (Faversham and Mid-Kent) (Con): The only venue yet to be constructed that continues to cause controversy is the shooting venue. I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) would have raised that issue had there been time to call his question, which is next on the Order Paper. The key issue is clearly cost. The shooting authorities make the claim, which was repeated in the House of Lords at the end of last week, that it would be £10 million cheaper to build the venue at Bisley. The Olympic Board clearly rejected that at its meeting last month, saying that it would be considerably cheaper to build it at Greenwich. At the previous Olympics questions the Minister undertook to publish a full set of costings so that we could all make a judgment. Is she in a position today to say when that will be, so that we can all make a judgment one way or the other?

Tessa Jowell: No, I am not in a position either to publish the figures today, or to say when we will. [Hon. Members: "Terrible!"] It is not terrible at all; the figures are subject to sensitive commercial negotiation. When we are in a position to publish them, I shall do so. There was wide consultation leading up to the Olympic Board's decision last month. That decision has now been taken, and I hope that we will be able to proceed to develop the venue at Woolwich as decided.

Sonnex Case

3.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor (Mr. Jack Straw): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the case of Daniel Sonnex. Last Thursday, Sonnex was convicted with Nigel Farmer of the brutal and sadistic murders of two French students, Laurent Bonomo and Gabriel Ferez. They were killed on 29 June last year at their flat in New Cross, in the London borough of Lewisham.

I know that I speak for the whole House in sending our deepest sympathies and condolences to the families of the two young victims of this appalling crime. I have met those families on two occasions and have discussed the case with the French ambassador. The families will continue to be given every possible support in their time of grief.

Sonnex was a serious criminal. At the time of the murders he could and should have been in custody. The background is as follows. In 2003, Sonnex was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for multiple offences. He behaved violently in prison and admitted to a prison medical officer that his "reactions could kill". He was released from prison on 8 February 2008, the latest date he could lawfully be held in custody, having twice been refused parole. He was on licence, liable to recall, until 11 October.

On Sonnex's release, there were serious failings by prison and probation staff. Potentially crucial information, such as that from the medical officer, which I have just quoted, was not shared between the Prison Service and the police and probation services. Sonnex was never adequately assessed for risk, nor considered for multi-agency public protection arrangements—MAPPA—both of which would have resulted in more intensive community supervision.

Within days of release, Sonnex and another individual were alleged to have tied up a relative and her partner and violently threatened them. The allegations were subsequently withdrawn, so the police pursued the matter no further. Probation staff then judged that the incident merited nothing more than a formal warning. That was clearly a further error. The seriousness of the allegation warranted a revised risk assessment and referral to a multi-agency public protection panel. That did not take place.

In the event, Sonnex complied with his licence requirements until 23 April last year, when he was arrested for handling stolen goods and remanded in custody. On 3 May, his offender manager initiated the process to recall him to prison in the light of the alleged offence. However, at the handling stolen goods court hearing on 16 May, Sonnex was granted bail.

From the record of the hearing, it seems that the prosecutor believed that Sonnex was being recalled to prison anyway, and consequently did not oppose bail. However, exactly what transpired in the court and its margins is still not clear. What is clear is that Sonnex should not have been released on to the streets that day.

The recall process was then poorly handled and subject to unacceptable delay by probation staff. In addition, the police failed to share information with probation services, which should have altered Sonnex's risk assessment. The recall was not submitted for approval until 12 June to the National Offender Management Service public protection unit, which turned it around promptly and issued the recall revocation notice to the police the next day. The probation service labelled the recall "standard" rather than "emergency", which meant that the police target time to return Sonnex to prison was 96 hours instead of 48.

The execution of the warrant was complicated by police concerns about whether Sonnex had access to firearms. In the event, the police did not attempt to serve the warrant and arrest him until 29 June. That was another wholly unacceptable delay, and, tragically, too late for Laurent Bonomo and Gabriel Ferez, as it was the same day as the murders were committed.

While responsibility for the murders lies with the perpetrators alone, the successive failings that I have outlined meant that Sonnex was free to kill those young men when he could and should have been locked up.

Those failures were not a question of poor resources, but of poor judgments and poor management in London Probation, as well as errors by the Metropolitan police and the Prison Service. As Secretary of State responsible for the probation service and the Prison Service, I take responsibility for their failings, and the Metropolitan police take responsibility for their failings. On behalf of each agency, I have apologised to the families of Laurent Bonomo and Gabriel Ferez, and I do so publicly again today.

Let me now set out the action that has been undertaken since those failures came to light in July last year. After the murders, London Probation held an immediate "serious further offence" review into the case. It was completed in October 2008. In the light of its findings, a more detailed NOMS investigation was established.

Having considered the latter report in late January, I determined with senior officials that the situation in London Probation warranted the most severe intervention statutorily available to me and that the chief officer of London Probation would be suspended pending the results.

Having been informed of this decision and reviewed the investigation reports, the chief officer very honourably accepted responsibility for the failures and resigned on 27 February. Pending recruitment of a permanent replacement, I approved the appointment of an experienced former chief officer, Paul Wilson, to lead London Probation from March. Meanwhile, London Probation conducted disciplinary investigations into the staff directly responsible for managing Sonnex, which determined that the failings were due to factors beyond their control. As a result, one individual received mandatory retraining, but no formal disciplinary action was taken.

Separately, in July 2008, the Metropolitan police referred the case to the Independent Police Complaints Commission. The Met has accepted both of the IPCC's subsequent recommendations, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will ensure that they are urgently implemented by every force. One police officer received a disciplinary warning. The Met now has a unit in each borough dedicated to arresting wanted offenders. It has also put in place revised systems with other agencies to improve information sharing and ensure the identification and timely arrest of such offenders.

In February this year, I agreed, following the chief officer's departure, that London Probation's performance should be subject to the most intensive scrutiny available.

[Mr. Jack Straw]

London Probation is also taking steps to provide far greater senior-level scrutiny and prioritisation of high-risk offenders. The new London director of offender management will report monthly on progress to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), the Minister with responsibility for prisons and probation, and my right hon. Friend will update Parliament in the autumn.

In March, I asked Her Majesty's chief inspector of probation, Andrew Bridges, to conduct a series of case inspections in London. Mr. Bridges has completed the inspection covering Greenwich and Lewisham, where Sonnex was managed, and has published his findings. Further reports will be published in the coming months. If I am not satisfied that there has been significant progress, I will not hesitate to intervene again. Finally, every probation area in the country has been instructed urgently to re-examine the way in which it manages offenders presenting a risk of harm, in the light of the failings in this case.

All the reports to which I have referred were published last Thursday as soon as the verdicts were known. Their recommendations have been accepted in full. Copies of the "serious further offence" review, the NOMS report, the chief inspector of probation's report and a London Criminal Justice Board report are available in the Vote Office and the Library.

The failings in the Sonnex case are a matter of profound sorrow and regret to everyone concerned. It is, however, important in considering the case that we do not unduly tarnish the work of all those dedicated professionals who have to deal every day with some of the most dangerous and unpredictable individuals in our society. But nor were those failures the result of a lack of resources—probation funding has increased by 70 per cent. in real terms since 1997, and London Probation underspent its £154 million budget last year by £3.5 million—rather, this was a failure to use the resources available to London Probation effectively.

When serious offenders are released into the community having completed their sentences, there will always be some risk that they will offend again. However, the criminal justice system has a duty to manage and minimise that risk. Where the system failed in this case, action has been taken. I will personally be monitoring progress until I am satisfied that standards have improved. The safety of the public and the memory of those two innocent young men whose lives were so brutally taken demand no less. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I thank the Justice Secretary for advance sight of his statement. The whole House will be shocked at the horrendous murder of Gabriel Ferez and Laurent Bonomo by Sonnex and Farmer. I join the Secretary of State in sending our sympathies to their families.

Those tragic deaths were the consequence of serious and systemic failures across the criminal justice system. The independent review into the case found "errors of judgment", "failures of communication", "inadequate staffing levels", wrong assessments and, finally, a whole series of "systematic" failures. Sonnex, a dangerous criminal, slipped through every crack in the system. He was serving an eight-year sentence for robberies and violence, yet despite 40 breaches of prison discipline, including violence to staff and inmates, he had to be released in less than five years. His risk rating was inexplicably downgraded from "high" to "medium". The probation officer in charge was overworked and overwhelmed, but even at this stage tragedy was avoidable.

Sonnex then kidnapped a pregnant woman and her partner. He held a knife to her throat and a hammer to his head. The fact that they managed to escape was down to their bravery and a measure of luck. Will the Justice Secretary explain how, after that, Sonnex received only a verbal warning, when the incident could and should have led to his immediate recall to jail? Sonnex was then arrested for handling stolen goods. Inexplicably, he was bailed. Recall proceedings were then initiated by the probation service, but they took over a month just to be processed, and by that time it was too late.

Does the Justice Secretary accept that these systemic failings are a direct result of a number of factors? First, that fixed-term sentences are utterly meaningless because, however poor the behaviour in prison, release at or soon after the halfway point is obligatory. Secondly, that an overcrowded prison estate has led Ministers to pressurise the courts and probation service not to use custody even when, as in this case, it is vital to protect the public. Thirdly, does the Secretary of State accept that the failure to deliver on yet another information technology system—C-NOMIS, linking the courts, prisons and probation service—left staff ill-equipped to cope, and that the £40 million squandered on that system would have been better spent on strengthening front-line capacity?

Fourthly, does the Justice Secretary accept the independent review's findings that the local probation service was inadequately staffed, diluting the supervision of such high-risk offenders? Does he also accept that the independent review's finding that the probation service focused on Sonnex's employment and accommodation needs, when its No.1 priority should have been public protection, is yet another symptom of confused priorities, paralysis and a lack of direction? He stated that resources were not an issue because the London section had an underspend of £3.5 million on an annual budget of £154 million, but is it not the case that this was due to the need of that section to anticipate cuts that would follow in an environment where consistent long-term funding simply does not exist?

The Justice Secretary seeks to respond to a wholesale breakdown in the system with announcements of procedural changes. Probation officers will get new guidance and a new template for managing high-risk offenders. If anyone is tempted to give credibility to this papering over the cracks, I would urge them to read the 2006 independent review into the murder of John Monckton by two dangerous criminals on probation, which revealed exactly the same basic failures to protect the public. A series of recommendations were made that, as we can see all too clearly today, have not been followed through.

Will the Justice Secretary confirm that Mr. David Scott, the chief probation officer for London who resigned in February, was brought in after the Monckton case? Will he confirm that Mr. Scott was specifically told at the time that he would be able to report back directly to the then Home Secretary on operational problems? Is

he aware that Mr. Scott found that, after the Ministry of Justice was created, he was always channelled through NOMS, so that he felt that his concerns were not heard, let alone heeded, by Ministers, as promised? How can the Justice Secretary expect the House, or the wider public, to have any confidence in this Government's resolve to see through his latest recommendations when they patently ignored the last ones?

That is my gravest fear. With £30 million of fresh cuts to front-line probation services, and with the Justice Secretary's Ministry issuing directions to reduce the monitoring of those released on licence for life to once every six months, how can he give the House and the public an unequivocal assurance that these errors will not be repeated again? I fear that he cannot, because this Government's systemic failures have put the public at greater risk.

Mr. Straw: Let me answer the hon. and learned Gentleman's points in turn. He first asked whether it was appropriate for this man, Sonnex, to have been given a determinate sentence. Having been given such a sentence, he was released at the last possible moment, and I do not think that even the hon. and learned Gentleman is suggesting that people should be kept in custody unlawfully. Further legislation was going through as that man was being sentenced to eight years for robbery and other violent offences in 2003, and we have now introduced indeterminate sentences for public protection. It is almost certain that, had the IPP sentence been available for this case in 2003, Sonnex would have been given it and he would probably not have been released. One of the reasons we introduced the sentence was to cope with exactly this kind of offender.

The hon. and learned Gentleman then made a number of points about computer systems, some of which have not worked out as well as they should have, but he effectively answered his own point by highlighting that what ultimately failed here was not a lack of information or any lack in the computer system, but a simple matter of judgments by people who should have reached different judgments. Faced with the information about Sonnex's alleged kidnapping of a relative, the probation service could and should have assessed the case as presenting a much higher risk; it should not only have given him a verbal warning, but made him subject to the MAPPA procedures and probably recalled him as well. As I say, that shows the importance of the judgments made—or those that failed to be made—all the way through, which is one of the causes of the tragedies that took place.

The hon. and learned Gentleman also referred to inadequate staffing in Greenwich and Lewisham, and I think that he is probably right about that, as it is also the view of Paul Wilson, who has replaced Mr. Scott on a temporary basis. What has emerged from work done across London Probation is that, overall, there was no shortage of resources—there could not have been; it underspent—the problem was the way the resources were allocated. The head of London Probation and the senior supervisors failed to take account of high work loads in some boroughs and lack of work loads in others, and they failed to shift resources accordingly. They failed to notice, for example, that although the average sickness rate across all London boroughs was already too high at about 13 days a year, it was running at 27 days a year—five and a half weeks—in Greenwich and Lewisham. That, alone, should have alerted senior managers to the problems that had to be faced.

Let me deal with the overall effectiveness of London Probation and of probation services more generally. I hesitate to use these figures—they are not being quoted by me or others in any way as an excuse for the failings that took place—but it happens to be the case that starting from a lamentable period of performance about a decade or so ago, there has been year by year improvement, including in recent years, in London Probation's recall performance. It was down at a third 10 years ago, but it is up to 88 per cent. for the most recent period—and we intend to increase it still more.

As for money, I am happy to take lectures from some others on that subject, but not from the Conservative Front-Bench team, which is committed to further cuts. The money for London Probation has gone up by 62 per cent. since 2001 and by 16 per cent. since 2005. The probation service budget is not being cut by £30 million—not at all. In common with other public services, it is facing tighter budgets than it had before, but that is from a position of very generous settlements over many years.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): It is typical of my right hon. Friend to come to the House to accept responsibility for the failings of his Department, but I am afraid that what he has said will not satisfy the parents of those who have died. Anyone who has read the victim impact assessment statements will know that the parents do not feel that what has been said so far has been satisfactory. My right hon. Friend talks about an increase in resources, but last year, as he said in an answer to me, the number of sick days in the probation service was 239,000. Replacing the chief executive of London Probation is simply not sufficient. Will he give the House an assurance that he will seek a very early meeting with the new Home Secretary, who has just left the Chamber, to address the communication problems so that when a request is made in the future, it is implemented immediately rather than in 33 days, which is the time it took for the last request from the probation service to be implemented by the police?

Mr. Straw: I will talk—indeed, I have already done so—to the new Home Secretary. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) for his comments. As I have highlighted in my answers to him, the level of sickness in some parts of London Probation was simply unacceptable. Given the shock created by this lamentable failure, as with the shock felt about similar previous incidents, improvements have been made, but we have to ensure that we raise the overall standard of management of the probation service, the police and the Prison Service in the handling of these dangerous offenders.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

This is a grim and dreadful case. I agree with the Secretary of State that ultimately the blame must lie with the evil individuals who carried out these appalling crimes, but the authorities must accept some degree of responsibility where their actions have contributed to creating the opportunity for crimes to be committed.

[David Howarth]

That is why the right hon. Gentleman was right to apologise to the families of the victims for the failures across the criminal justice system: the Prison Service, the probation service, the Courts Service and the police. However, I must question his view that all the failures were failures of individuals or of management, and not failures of policy.

The right hon. Gentleman has said repeatedly that there was not a problem with overall resources, only a problem with the way in which those resources were allocated. Will he confirm what independent research has found—that the number of front-line probation officers in London fell by more than 700 between 2002 and 2006? If resources are not a problem, why has he announced the provision of 100 more probation officers in London? Surely that announcement itself flatly contradicts his argument.

The Secretary of State referred to the £3.5 million underspend in the London probation service, but did not answer the question put to him by the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve). May I ask that question in a slightly different way? Will he tell the House precisely how the underspend came about? Is it not the case that underspends often happen because of too frequent changes of policy, and because politicians demand change on unrealistic time scales, so that managers do not know how to plan for the long term? Can the Secretary of State guarantee that nothing of that sort happened in this case?

What explains the extraordinary figures relating to the inexperience of the probation officers concerned—nine months' experience in the case of one officer at the centre of these events, and only two years' experience in the case of the supervising officer? What has happened to all the experienced officers?

Let me turn to the subject of the Prison Service and the mistakes that were made about the classification of Sonnex as medium risk. The Secretary of State recognises that part of the problem must have been the chaotic state of the C-NOMIS project. Is it not the case—the right hon. Gentleman has not answered this question properly yet—that the extra millions that the Government claim to have put into the probation service were thrown at that failed project? Do the Government not take responsibility for that failure, or is it merely managerial as well?

Finally, let me deal with the issue of the police. The crucial question is, why did they not take Sonnex into custody in the 16 days between his recall and the murders? Could that failure have anything to do with the fact that at the time national police targets were all about sanction detections, so the kind of work involved in taking Sonnex back into prison would have been a low priority?

There are questions to be answered here, not just by individual officials on the operational side of the criminal justice system but by those responsible for policy, and ultimately that includes the Government.

Mr. Straw: I have made it clear from the moment when this matter became public last Thursday that I accept responsibility for the failures that have happened. They were mainly, but of course not exclusively, failures—I was going to say "failures by individuals", but they were failures within an environment as well. I am not suggesting that the authorities should not—if I may pick up the phrase used by the hon. Member for Cambridge (David Howarth)—accept some degree of responsibility. Of course they do: London Probation does, so does the National Offender Management Service, so do the Metropolitan police, and so do I.

The hon. Gentleman quoted a figure relating to a decline in London probation officer numbers which I simply do not recognise. The figures that I have show that between 2003 and 2007 inclusive—I do not have last year's figures—there was a net increase in the number of senior probation officers and probation officers as a whole. That included a decline in the number of senior probation officers, an increase in the number of probation officers, and a very big increase in the number of probation service officers. Across the country, there has been an increase between 1997 and 2007 of getting on for 200 in the number of probation officers and senior probation officers, and an increase of more than 4,000 in the number of probation service officers. The money that has been put in has, therefore, gone principally on additional staff, as well as greatly improved training.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the inexperience of the probation officers who were expected to supervise Sonnex. That was terrible, and it is one of the reasons I have been extremely anxious throughout all my public comments not to suggest that that individual probation officer was responsible for the errors that were made. To do so would be unacceptable, because of the fact that somebody of such inexperience was put in charge and that they were given far too high a case load, despite neither being necessary given the resources available within the service.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned C-NOMIS. In 2007, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson) made the decision to stop C-NOMIS—to reduce its scope. His decisions, for which I commend him, have been endorsed by the Public Accounts Committee, and a reduced C-NOMIS will be operational next year. It is not the case that it sucked resources away from front-line probation services.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about national police targets. They have been one of the contributory factors that have led to a significant reduction in crime, which affects all our constituents, but they had nothing whatever to do with the failures here. The police had the target, which should have been shorter, to arrest Sonnex within 96 hours—four days. They palpably failed to meet that target, when they should have done, and that should be seen along with the other failures elsewhere in the system.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow) (Lab): This was obviously an absolutely horrific crime and there were some inexcusable failings in how it was dealt with, such as failures to share information. The Secretary of State has repeatedly said that it was not a matter of resources, but he has also said that staffing levels were inadequate in that part of the probation service. How many cases was this inexperienced officer being asked to handle, and how confident can the Secretary of State be that officers will not be in a similar position in future given that we are expecting significant cuts in probation service budgets over the next few years?

Mr. Straw: The officer was handling about 120 cases, and for the level of work load and responsibility, it should have been 50 or 60; that is accepted. The issue, however, is that resources were not allocated properly either across different London boroughs according to their needs, or within each borough according to the priority that ought to be given to offenders. Too little was going to high-pressured boroughs and, in a sense, too much was going to those that could have managed with rather fewer resources.

How confident am I that the service can manage? I am as confident as I can be. As my hon. Friend knows from experience, it is impossible in any system to guarantee that an offender released from prison, however long they have served and however serious their parole reassessment, will never commit a further offence. Life is not like that, I am afraid, and we would be deluding the public if we said that we thought otherwise. We are, however, taking every step we can to improve the system and ensure that this kind of appalling thing is less likely to happen.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Is the Justice Secretary seriously claiming that, if there had not been a 2.5 per cent. underspend in the London probation service and there had been some reallocation of resources, the case load, supervision levels and experience of the officers involved would have been adequate throughout the boroughs of Lewisham and Greenwich? Does he also recognise that the shattering effect on public confidence of this case and the Monckton case is so great that in order for us to have a system of licensing, which any good prison system needs, an enormous effort will have to go into winning public confidence in the fact that soundly based decisions are made and that they are effectively implemented?

Mr. Straw: I am quite clear, and I have been assured of this, that there was no reason why within existing resources there should not have been a more sensible case load and more experienced officers allocated to cover such a case, even in London. Indeed, in general, including in London, this kind of case is covered by more experienced and better supervised officers.

On resources, I must repeat the point that an almost unique level of sickness of, on average, five and a half weeks for the staff in that office was ridiculously high and should have alerted senior managers to the fact that there were some endemic problems requiring immediate effort.

I accept what the right hon. Gentleman says about the issue of release on licence—public confidence has been damaged—but it is far better for such offenders to be released on licence than simply to be dumped in the community, which is what used to happen.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State to focus on the issue of early release during a sentence? Where a person is sentenced to eight years—or to eight months, for that matter—one can understand their being released after half their time if they have behaved well in prison, but if they have behaved disgracefully is there not an argument for their being made to serve their full sentence? If that does not happen, what is the point of their behaving well? I am sure that many of us would find it quite offensive to hear that this person committed 40 breaches of discipline yet still came out.

Mr. Straw: Had this man behaved properly and also presented a very low risk of reoffending, he would have received parole—he was refused that on two occasions. I accept, however, the burden of what the hon. Gentleman says, which is that there are some offenders who ought to stay in prison until it is safe to release them. That is why we introduced, to some controversy, the sentence of indeterminate detention for public protection. More than 5,000 offenders are now on an IPP and it is having a salutary effect on them.

Mr. Malins: That is a different point.

Mr. Straw: It is not different; an IPP would have applied in this case, but the provision was not on the statute book when this man was sentenced in 2003.

Mr. Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): One must question the culture of an organisation that imposes the management of a criminal of this degree of evil on someone who is so inexperienced and who has such a case load—they had about 100 other cases to manage. The Secretary of State ought to be able to give the House a cast-iron guarantee today that criminals of such calibre will simply not be managed in this way in the future.

Mr. Straw: I give the House, and the hon. Gentleman, the guarantee that I am determined to ensure that this kind of failing does not happen. What I cannot do, because we are dealing with thousands of staff and many thousands of potential offenders, is give an absolute guarantee—nobody in my shoes could do so—that there will never be failings of this kind. I pray to God that there will not be any such failings, but I cannot guarantee it.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): The Justice Secretary knows that hundreds of probation officers throughout England and Wales are grossly overworked and have far too many cases with which to try to deal. Why are these cuts now affecting recruitment? In Wales, 41 of the 44 probation officers who will qualify in October will be without jobs, and the situation is the same from Humberside to Somerset. I fear that this sort of thing will happen again—please God that it does not.

Mr. Straw: There is an issue to address about the fact that, at the moment, those on training to do probation work are not necessarily matched to jobs. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson) is about to issue a new consultation on changing the training of probation officers, and I commend that to the House. Part of that will involve ensuring that there is a direct match between the places available for training and the guarantee of a job at the end of it; that will be better all round. There has been a reduction in vacancies because of the overall economic climate, but I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that the probation service, be it in Wales or elsewhere, will suffer serious cuts. Money is tighter than it has been, but it is tighter from a high base.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): To return to the issue of length of sentence raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), this criminal was imprisoned for eight years and, according to the Secretary of State, behaved violently there and admitted to a

[Mr. Peter Bone]

prison medical officer that his reactions could kill, so many people will be surprised to learn that the maximum sentence that he could serve was only five years. There does not seem to be much transparency in sentencing, and that will not restore the confidence of the British people. If a sentence is eight years, should it not be eight years?

Mr. Straw: This should not be a party political issue, but this man was sentenced under Conservative legislation, he had to be released at the two thirds point and the licence lasted only until the three quarter point. We have tried to change that structure. We could say that prisoners should serve exactly the sentence that is awarded by the courts, or we could have minimums and maximums, as the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) suggested—effectively what we have at the moment. However sentences are denominated, we need to have incentives for good behaviour and penalty periods for bad behaviour. We also need to take into account the fact that the prison population is rising and will continue to rise, and resources—although they should be increased—are finite. Those are realities that affect Governments of every persuasion.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The statement understandably concentrated on the probation service, but if events on 16 May had been handled correctly, two young men would be alive today. Sonnex was brought before the courts on a completely separate offence and was granted bail, when that should never have happened. In the statement, the Secretary of State says that it is still not clear exactly what transpired on that day. How can we have no idea why someone was given bail when he should have been in prison?

Mr. Straw: I try to tell the truth in this House, and I wish I could give a better account of what happened in that court, but I cannot. Magistrates courts are not courts of record, and there is a wholly inadequate record of what transpired. It is clear that no application to oppose bail was made by the prosecution. It also appears clear that the reason no application was made was that inquiries had suggested that Sonnex was due to be rearrested for a breach. It is clear that the information available to the court was flaky. The answer to the question about whether he was about to be rearrested was not pinned down, and the Attorney-General, the police service and Her Majesty's Courts Service are determined to ensure that this does not happen again. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that if this man had been remanded in custody on 16 May, as he had been on 3 May, none of the rest of this would have happened.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): In south-west London in recent weeks people have seen the eventual conviction of John Warboys, a cab driver who had come to the attention of the police but who then went off the radar and committed a string of serious offences against women, and now the case of Dano Sonnex, who came from a criminal and violent family and had been sent to prison for eight years for stabbing and other serious knife crimes. Sonnex had said that he felt he could kill, but on his release that information was not passed to the Prison Service or the probation service. It would be helpful if the Home Secretary gave an assurance—it is a Home Office and a Ministry of Justice matter—that when people with such criminal records, or facing such allegations, emerge into society, senior police and probation officers are in charge of their ongoing management. If that were done, it would be some reassurance that the lapses that happened in this case would not happen again.

Mr. Straw: I basically agree with the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed the whole Sonnex issue with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, Sir Paul Stephenson, and with the acting deputy, Tim Godwin, and they are seized of the need to improve the police's performance in this case. The terrible error happened in court on 16 May, and if the probation service had acted within targets and if the police had acted properly within their slightly longer targets, Sonnex would not have been available to commit those murders on 29 June.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The recall failure was at the centre of this atrocity, and those failures went far wider than just the probation service. In fact, they come right back to this House. There should be greater powers to force the immediate recall of dangerous criminals and potentially dangerous people. When will this House start to err on the side of protecting innocent people—the public—rather than on the side of the rights of potentially dangerous criminals?

Mr. Straw: We have been much criticised for it, but that is what we have been seeking to do in recent years. If the hon. Gentleman goes through all the reports—I have published every report that has been made available to me—he will see that there is no suggestion whatsoever that the recall powers available to the probation service and the police were inadequate. This man could and should have been assessed as a high risk and probably recalled when he was alleged—just alleged—to have kidnapped a relative. He certainly should have been recalled when he was arrested and charged with handling stolen goods. Without any question, the full powers were there. The National Offender Management Service—the one agency to come out of this properly—turned the application round within 24 hours, as it was required to do. It was there. It was an issue not about powers, but about judgment and the use of powers.

BILL PRESENTED

Citizens' Convention (accountÂbility and Ethics) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Martin Caton, supported by Norman Lamb, Mr. Douglas Carswell, Mr. David Drew, Julia Goldsworthy, Jim Dowd and Norman Baker, presented a Bill to set up a Citizens' Convention for the purposes of establishing minimum standards of ethics for Members of Parliament and for promoting the involvement of citizens in political decision making; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 106).

Standards and Privileges

4.16 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Bryant): I beg to move,

That this House—

(1) approves the Seventh Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (House of Commons Paper No. 501);

(2) endorses the recommendations in paragraphs 49, 54, 73 and 85 of the Report; and

(3) accordingly instructs the Serjeant at Arms and the Director of Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology to withdraw access to the House and its facilities from Mr Stephen Lotinga for a period of 14 days, and from Mr Tom Smith for a period of 28 days.

The Chairman of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), is in his place and, I am sure, will catch your eye in a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker. Indeed, it is for him to lay out the full substance of his report. I do not want in any sense to tread on his toes, but merely wish to make one point about the way in which the House deals with the business of leaking from Select Committees and how the House authorities can respond to the comments made in his report.

A previous report of the Committee said:

"Leaking is a reprehensible act and in any case where this Committee"—

namely, the Standards and Privileges Committee—

"is able to discover the source of a leak it will be prepared to recommend appropriately severe sanctions."

That was the 20th report of the Session 2007-08. In today's report, which we are considering this afternoon, the Committee draws the attention of the House to the fact that

"the Liaison Committee has recently (on 14 May) agreed a restatement of procedure to be followed by select committees of the House when dealing with sensitive papers."

It said that, in particular,

"Sensitive papers, in particular draft reports or evidence which is security classified, will not be circulated by electronic means, save in exceptional circumstances."

The Committee's report went on to point out that

"the secretariat did not apply the appropriate marking to the document"

that was leaked, and that

"it circulated the document as an attachment to an e-mail without protecting it and without drawing attention to its sensitive nature".

The Committee's report draws attention to the fact that that is a problem and points out that if the Committee secretariat had acted in a different way, it might have been presenting a rather different report with rather different sets of conclusions.

The Committee calls on the senior management in the Committee Office to draw the Liaison Committee's note

"to the attention of all clerks"

and to ensure

"that steps be taken to ensure that the procedures set out in the Note are implemented and adhered to."

I merely want to reassure the House that I, too, will be writing to the House authorities to ensure that that is followed up, and to ensure that in every instance Clerks ensure that hon. Members on all Select Committees understand the rules by which Select Committees operate so that there is no inappropriate leaking, which interrupts the proper business of the Committees. I think that all Members on both sides of the House would acknowledge that Select Committees have been one of the most important innovations in the past 35 years and one of the most important ways in which we do our business today.

Finally, I thank the Chairman of the Committee and all its members for their assiduous work in bringing the report to the attention of the House.

4.19 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Deputy Leader of the House for his supportive remarks, for the action he outlined in his closing paragraphs and for his kind words about the work of my Committee.

At the end of last year, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale), carried out an inquiry into the BBC's commercial operations. On 25 February, substantial excerpts from the Committee's draft heads of report were published on *The Guardian* website. The Committee immediately carried out a leak inquiry, which failed to discover the source of the leak. Having consulted the Liaison Committee, the CMS Committee made a special report to the House, stating that the leak constituted a serious interference with its work.

Like my colleagues on the Liaison Committee, I accept entirely that such leaks interfere with the work of Committees, and that it was right for the CMS Committee to refer the matter to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Disclosure of a Committee's draft conclusions not only reduces the impact of the eventual report and gives prior but not necessarily wholly accurate warning to those who may be the subject of its recommendations, but as the Deputy Leader of the House has just said, can poison working relationships in a Committee. When a leak occurs, and it is not clear who is responsible, everyone is under suspicion. That includes the staff of the Committee and its advisers as well as Members.

The CMS Committee in its special report described leaking as "reprehensible". My Committee used the same word last year to describe leaks from the Home Affairs and European Scrutiny Committees, and in a coda to the report we debate today we have tried to explain why, at a time when the public are more concerned with transparency and freedom of information than with preserving the confidentiality of Select Committee papers, the House should continue to take leaks seriously.

It is in the public interest for the work of Select Committees to be effective. All those of whatever political persuasion who value our parliamentary democracy wish the Government of the day to be subject to the most effective evidence-based scrutiny that can be brought to bear. Select Committees are an important part of the apparatus for achieving that, but the effectiveness of a Select Committee can be seriously compromised by a breakdown of trust. The House is right, therefore, not to tolerate the actions of those who breach its rules by leaking confidential Committee papers, and it rightly

[Sir George Young]

expects the Committee on Standards and Privileges to do a thorough job of investigating such leaks, as I believe my Committee has done in this case.

As our report sets out, we had grounds for pursuing a particular line of inquiry. We saw two of the main players twice, and all those involved had an opportunity to explain their actions in a private evidence session without the pressures of television or media coverage. With the assistance of PICT—Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology—we were able to discover how the leak came about and to obtain a full explanation from the person who provided the draft heads of report to a journalist from *The Guardian*. All the witnesses confirmed our understanding of the facts, which are set out in full in the report.

It was neither the first nor the last leak of the conclusions of the CMS Committee's inquiry into the BBC. There had been an earlier leak to the same newspaper just 10 days previously, and there was a subsequent leak to *The Daily Telegraph*. Neither of those leaks was as serious as the one on 25 February and neither was referred to my Committee. Although we asked our witnesses about the earlier leak, we were unable fully to pursue it. I mention that because it is possible that there were others associated with the CMS Committee who were leaking but who as yet remain unidentified.

I turn to my Committee's conclusions and recommendations. To start at the beginning, it is clear that the CMS Committee staff did not follow the correct procedures for the draft heads of report. They did not mark the document as confidential, they did not password-protect the electronic version, and they gave it an unnecessarily wide circulation. Although those shortcomings do not excuse the subsequent actions of others, they significantly mitigate them. Lessons have been learned, and I am delighted that the Liaison Committee has promulgated new guidance to Select Committee staff. I expect them to follow it and I ask colleagues who sit on Select Committees not to put pressure on Committee staff to depart from those procedures.

It is now clear that Mr. Tom Smith, the parliamentary researcher for the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), who sits on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, was in the habit of routinely passing on Committee papers to the office of the Liberal Democrat spokesman on Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster). He should not have been doing that. In a crucial misjudgment on his part, Mr. Smith failed to tell us that he was routinely passing on those papers, until confronted with the evidence.

Mr. Smith also misled my Committee on his first appearance before it by withholding information and by failing to provide full answers to our questions. He has committed two serious contempts, to use the language of the House, first in passing on confidential papers and secondly in misleading the Committee. We therefore recommend withdrawal of Mr. Smith's access to the House and its facilities for a period of 28 calendar days, which, if the House agrees, will begin today. In my Committee's view, that is a proportionate penalty, given the seriousness of the offences.

As for the role of Alice Aitken, who works in the office of the hon. Member for Bath, it is clear that she was essentially acting as an intermediary by sharing the Culture, Media and Sport Committee papers sent to her with Mr. Stephen Lotinga, who was responsible for culture, media and sport in the parliamentary office of the Liberal Democrats. On balance, the Committee did not conclude that a formal penalty would be appropriate in that case, for reasons that we set out in paragraph 57.

It was Mr. Lotinga who passed a copy of the draft heads of report to a journalist on *The Guardian*, Mark Sweney. Although we were told by Mr. Smith that Mr. Lotinga had previously informed him that he was not involved in the leak, Mr. Lotinga admitted his involvement to us and made a full apology. We acknowledge his remorse and his co-operation with our inquiry, but we feel that the seriousness of the offence demands a formal penalty, and we have therefore recommended that Mr. Lotinga's access to the House and its facilities be withdrawn for a period of 14 calendar days.

I turn finally to the role of hon. Members in this affair. I have mentioned already the part played by the office of the hon. Member for Bath. He told my Committee that he gave no specific guidance to his staff about the handling of Committee papers, and he was unaware that such papers were routinely passing through his office. We accept that he was not involved in the leak, or even aware of it, but like all hon. Members, he needs to take responsibility for the conduct of his office and those who work in it. As the report states, the hon. Gentleman has been "remiss".

The hon. Member for Torbay was the only person named in our report who was entitled to see all the papers of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which he was a member. He was responsible for the secure custody of those papers, and he also had a duty of care towards his staff, and not least towards Mr. Smith. That included a duty to ensure that they were fully briefed on the importance of respecting and preserving the confidentiality of papers. The hon. Gentleman told us that he asked his staff to abide by the standard contractual terms and conditions of employment that applied to them, which include a duty of confidentiality. I think that he now accepts that that was not enough, and I look forward to his contribution to this debate.

Finally, may I make some observations on the respective roles in this place of Members and their staff? Just as Ministers are accountable to Parliament for the actions of their officials, so are we all, as hon. Members, accountable for what is done by our staff in our name. It is right, therefore, that the hon. Member for Torbay should take some responsibility for the actions of his researcher, of which, I accept, he was completely unaware at the time. That does not, however, absolve entirely those individuals who played the main roles in the affair, Mr. Smith and Mr. Lotinga. In my Committee's view, the House needs to send a strong signal that it will not tolerate such breaches of trust as both men committed. Nor will it tolerate one of its Committees being misled by a witness. In agreeing the motion before it today, the House will send the appropriate signals.

4.28 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): I thank the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), for his Committee's consideration of this case. I should like to make it clear from the outset that I do not approve, or seek to excuse, the unauthorised disclosure

of Committee papers. The Standards and Privileges Committee was good enough to include, in paragraph 71 of its report, my initial comments to the inquiry:

"In a sense I am very angry about being here today. I have been a member of select committees and been a Member of this House now for 11 going on 12 years; I have never leaked anything; I think it is reprehensible to leak things".

That strongly remains my view.

I am grateful to the Committee for its finding, on page 17 of the report, that I was not directly responsible for the unauthorised disclosure of the draft heads of report. There is no suggestion that I was in any way instrumental in the forwarding of the papers, and the report states that I was unaware that my assistant was receiving Committee papers, still less routinely forwarding them. The Committee found, however, that I should have explained more fully to my assistant his duties under rules of parliamentary privilege, and that I had a duty to explain to him the meaning of the confidentiality clauses in the contract that he had signed.

This is an important lesson for all hon. Members, particularly those who sit on Select Committees. The Standards and Privileges Committee clearly feels that a specific duty of care rests on each of us to make these matters explicitly clear to every member of our staff. In so far as I failed to make this plain to a member of my staff, I of course accept the conclusions of the Committee and apologise to the House. May I suggest to the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee that it might be appropriate to send new guidance to every hon. Member and every member of staff, including House staff, to draw renewed attention to their terms and conditions relating to the confidentiality of Select Committee papers and with whom they may be shared?

4.30 pm

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): I think this is an example of a lot of humbug being expressed in the House, and I want to place on record my disappointment at the Committee's conclusions with regard to sanctions. I realise this is a sensitive and stressful matter both for some hon. Members and for their staff, and I bear no malice whatever towards them. It is an example of the culture of this place, the overbearing command of Front Benchers—Government, Conservative and Liberal—and the tribal view that one must be able to score points and expose things in advance, get brownie points in the press and so on.

I am sick and tired of it, especially after battling for many years, and certainly since 1997 when I was put on the Foreign Affairs Committee. I bear the scars of the Sierra Leone inquiry, which resulted in the 1999 inquiry referred to in the current report. I admired the late Robin Cook and loved him very much, and I still do. I remember him phoning me at midnight one Sunday, saying, "Andrew, what the XXXX are you doing?", because I was asking questions. One of our then colleagues was leaking stuff to him—documentation and, as we now know, almost word for word the deliberations of the Foreign Affairs Committee, when the Government were doing everything to stop my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and me supporting and combining with other Members to ensure that we had full scrutiny and accountability.

That is not the only occasion in my time on the Foreign Affairs Committee that that has happened. I have deprecated the fact that there has been an unhealthy linkage, primarily of Labour Members with the Government, but it also happens the other way. I can think of instances when the partisan enthusiasm of a particular Conservative Member was reflected in his feeding information to his Front-Bench team. I am surprised at the Liberal party, which is embarrassed, particularly by the evidence of paragraph 55 of the report, which cannot be ignored. It states that Mr. Smith

"told us that when he took up his position in October 2008, he attended a meeting of the Liberal Democrat CMS team, including Members of Parliament, at which he was told that he should send CMSC papers to Ms Aitken, so that she could keep the team briefed on the Committee's work."

The real test is whether we will allow this culture to go on. That gentleman was probably the most innocent party. He was newly employed in his job and he was told what was expected of him by the Front-Bench team of a particular party, but all the parties are guilty of the same thing. Unless or until we create a situation in which members of Select Committees can leave their party affiliation at the Committee door, that will continue, and it debases Parliament.

I appeal to colleagues to pause and reflect. The Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal party keep going on about reforming Parliament. This is a test of whether they mean what they say. Even within their own organisations, they ought to make it a serious offence against their party for people to abuse the Select Committee system.

The response of the Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) to paragraph 85 is just pathetic. Let me justify that statement, because I do not think anybody will argue but that its conclusions are logical. There was an attempt to deceive the Committee's investigation into the leak; the good gentleman set out to dissemble—to mislead—the right hon. Gentleman's Committee in its legitimate inquiry; and all there will be is a 28-day sanction. However, unless or until the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Liberal party and this House are determined that when people appear before a Select Committee they shall be required to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, such events will continually occur.

And there are casualties. If Dr. David Kelly had been told and advised and had had to give evidence under oath, as happens in the United States Congress, people would not have prevailed upon him not to be candid with the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Obviously, colleagues will recall how the matter is ingrained in my memory. I therefore say to the House and to Front-Bench spokesmen, "Don't give me all this nonsense about parliamentary reform unless you mean it." I say it to the leader of the Conservative party, too, and to the leader of the Liberal party, in particular, because sometimes it is like the unctuous talking to the sanctimonious.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): Ooh!

Andrew Mackinlay: The hon. Lady goes, "Ooh!", but I listened to what the leader of the Liberal party said and I desperately believe that we must address the status of this House and the role of Select Committees. As the

[Andrew Mackinlay]

House knows, in my defence I thought that the whole business of Regional Select Committees was nonsense and an invitation for such events to occur. Unless and until there are proper sanctions against such abuse, it will go on. One could say, "Everyone's a beneficiary and everyone's a loser; it all works out; it's all politics," but this issue is related to the other matter of our party leaders talking about the reform and status of Parliament.

The business of the Select Committee staff is a total red herring. Whether or not they put "Confidential" on the documents and whether or not there was a problem with the technology is irrelevant; we all know what the ground rules are supposed to be, and they should be enforced. I hope that Members will reflect on the matter. The hon. Lady thought I was being perhaps pompous by pointing it out, but I ask her to reflect on the matter, too. It is wrong that the events should have occurred, but I do not attribute anything to the poor people in the report. They are probably very upset, and no doubt hon. Members will reflect that there was wrongdoing, but, to others who go before Select Committees in the future, we really must show that documentation has to be clearly safeguarded, and that people should be candid—certainly with a Committee that inquires into wrongdoing and bad conduct.

In my view, there must be severe sanctions, because they will mean that people do not commit wrongdoing, and sanctions afford a degree of protection to people who want to tell the truth to a Select Committee. If they know that they have to take an oath or—if I cannot persuade the House about an oath—that a serious sanction will be applied to them, such events will not happen. It would help them to tell others, such as Members, civil servants and company executives, who might be leaning on them: "Get lost; I'm appearing before Parliament."

I remember that I was once derided for saying that this is the high court of Parliament. I could not understand why and I still do not today. It is the high court of Parliament, and we have to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I do not want to delay the House, but everyone here should reflect on the issue and talk to the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal party and say, "Don't give us all this nonsense unless and until we make the Select Committees independent of the Front Benches and the party spokespersons in our political system."

4.40 pm

Mr. Dan Foster (Bath) (LD): I begin by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) for the measured way he has responded to the report and for the apology that he has so willingly given the House. I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) has said, with one exception: he is wrong in the inferences he has drawn in respect of instructions having been given by any member of the Liberal Democrat Culture, Media and Sport team, which I lead.

However, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay and probably with all Members of the House that the leaking of Select Committee documents is wrong and should be deprecated. Although paragraph 59 of the report makes it absolutely clear that I had no involvement with and no knowledge of the leak that took place, I accept entirely that I, like other hon. Members, have to take responsibility—in my case, for actions that have taken place in my office and within my wider DCMS team. In so far as I did not give instructions to my staff about the need to deal sensitively with documents of this kind, I was remiss. I apologise to the House for that.

The Deputy Leader of the House said that there was a responsibility to ensure that all members of Select Committees were reminded of their responsibilities in that regard, but I believe we should go further and accept the recommendation of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay. He rightly pointed out that all Members need to be reminded of the importance of giving such instructions clearly to all members of staff who work for us and to those within the teams for which we have responsibility. For my part in the issue, limited though it may have been, I apologise to the House.

4.42 pm

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford) (Con): I, too, express sympathy with the comments of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) about the need to strengthen the Select Committee system. However, I want to concentrate specifically on the events that occurred in the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, which I chair.

I express my thanks and those of the rest of my Committee for the work of the Standards and Privileges Committee. When we made the referral to that Committee, to ask it to try to discover the source of the leak, we did so without huge optimism that it would be successful; on previous occasions, the Committee has not managed to expose sources with the success that it has had on this occasion. We are grateful to the Committee and we hope that the fact that we have been able to discover the source and take action this afternoon will send a message to other Select Committees about the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of their proceedings.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), who chairs the Standards and Privileges Committee, began by talking about the importance of a relationship of trust between Committee members; that, he said, was why leaks should be regarded as reprehensible. I entirely endorse his words, but I take issue with one comment in his report. Having said that the matter was serious for the reason that I have just mentioned, he went on to say:

> "We have to recognise that no-one outside Parliament has complained about the leaking of the draft Heads of Report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on the BBC's commercial operations. It is quite possible that no-one outside Parliament cares."

My right hon. Friend will not be surprised that I slightly dispute that. The leak occurred online, appearing on mediaguardian.co.uk. Most news distribution is done online in the world that the Culture, Media and Sport Committee looks at; indeed, as observers will know, that is the cause of problems for the traditional media.

The report appeared at about 10 am, I think. I was at a meeting of the British Screen Advisory Council, an umbrella body for media organisations. I was approached

by representatives of ITV and the BBC within 35 minutes of the report's appearance, and I was called by the chief executive of Channel 4 within two hours. I simply say that the report was of great interest to a number of people in the media. It also had a degree of market sensitivity because we were dealing with the independent production sector, which was going to be affected by our recommendations.

I fully agree with my right hon. Friend that the relationship of trust is paramount, but I would not like him to think there were not other good reasons why we felt that the leaking of that particular heads of report was indeed a serious matter.

In its report, the Committee rightly draws attention to failings of members of my Committee's staff. That is fully accepted by those members of staff, and they will take its recommendations very seriously. As Chairman of the Committee, I should like to put on record the extent to which we depend on those staff and how professional and dedicated I have always found them. It is not just my Committee that enjoys that degree of support; I think that any hon. Member who is involved on Select Committees would agree that generally we are extremely well served by our staff. I was slightly surprised to discover that some of our papers were being circulated by e-mail not only to people involved in our present inquiry but to some of our advisers in other inquiries. I am not sure what our adviser on heritage and planning made of the heads of report on the BBC's commercial operations. In future, we will be much more restrained in circulating material; I think that that lesson will be well learned in all Select Committees.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders)—in this context, I would say my hon. Friend—has made a gracious apology to the House. When I first asked all members of the Committee whether they could give any indication of how the leak occurred, he was clear that he had no knowledge of how it came about. I said to him at the time that I fully accepted his assurance, and I fully accept it this afternoon. It is extremely unfortunate that the leak occurred within his office, but he has made it plain that he had no knowledge of it and that it was not under his instruction. That is fully accepted by me and, I think, by all members of the Committee. Although I think I am right in saying that he told the Standards and Privileges Committee that our inquiry into the BBC's commercial operations did not "float his boat", he is nevertheless a valuable member of our Committee who participates in other areas of our activities. We are very glad that he does so and look forward to his continuing to do so in future.

4.47 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I, too, thank the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and the Standards and Privileges Committee, on which I was privileged to serve for a good period of time, for their work and care in producing this report. I want to make it absolutely clear that there are no circumstances in which I condone or seek to excuse the leaking of material from Select Committees. As the hon. Member for Thurrock (Andrew Mackinlay) said, that happens far too often, and it has happened historically. He referred back to the Foreign Affairs Committee and its Sierra Leone report, and to his involvement and that of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)—and, rather gnomically, "other members", of whom I was one. We were very much engaged with that episode. I remember how outraged we were that our carefully constructed lines of inquiry were being directly leaked to a Minister of the Crown, in direct contravention of the interest not only of the Committee but of the inquiry whereby we were trying to shed light.

I hardly know of any Select Committee where there has not been, on occasion, at least an intimation that material has been leaked. That even includes the Standards and Privileges Committee. There was a time when we were very concerned that material was being leaked from that Committee; happily, that practice has not persisted. Let us be absolutely clear: the leaking of material from Select Committees cannot be condoned or excused; I do not care which party is involved—the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives or Labour—or whether it involves members of staff or Members of Parliament.

I am grateful to the Deputy Leader of the House for the advice that he has caused to be sent to Clerks to Committees, because it is clear from the report and from the remarks of the Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee that procedures had become a little lax in terms of how material was circulated. It was perhaps circulated rather more widely than it should have been, and it was not sufficiently clearly marked as confidential. That is a lesson that is well learned.

I have just two further points to make. With regard to the leak inquiry itself, one thing puzzles me. It is clear from the very first page of evidence that there were in fact two leaks, one on 14 February and one on 25 February. As I understand it, all the evidence relates to the leak of 25 February, and there is no link, either suggested or otherwise, between my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) and the very similar material that appeared on the earlier date. I wonder why the Committee did not inquire into the earlier leak and its provenance, because that leak seems equally relevant and remiss.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for having the good grace to apologise to the House despite the fact that, as he said, he clearly had no direct knowledge of the circumstances in which the material was leaked. What he said was important—that we each have a duty to ensure that members of our staff clearly understand the rules of privilege and what they are required to do and not do. That applies to any Member who is a member of a Select Committee, but equally to any other Member who receives a Committee's material. I suspect that many Members are in the same position as my hon. Friend of not having made that explicit to all their staff. I hope that clear guidance will be given to every single one of us, and to the staff under our control, that they must not leak such information, and that to do so is a contempt of the House and of the process of Select Committees.

I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Thurrock that the sooner we get Select Committees absolutely free of the executives of each of our parties, the better. Then they will be able to act properly independently, scrutinise and do their job effectively without any suggestion that they have ulterior political motives, beyond the obvious one of doing their job as Members of this House. If we make that clear in today's debate, we will do a good job on behalf of the House.

4.52 pm

Mr. Shailesh Vara (North-West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I, too, welcome the conclusions before us and congratulate the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), and all the Committee's other members, on having undertaken a thorough investigation and come up with their conclusions.

All of us recognise the importance of this issue. If Select Committees are to operate effectively, it is vital that they can carry out their work free from leaks, particularly given the cross-party, collegiate nature of their work. Much has already been said, and I do not intend to detain the House longer than is necessary, so I shall simply make three brief points.

First, given the discussions on a new parliamentary standards authority, we must ensure that it does not impact on this type of investigation being carried out with similar conclusions, including the ability to impose sanctions. Secondly, as we reform the way in which MPs' staff are employed, we must give serious thought to sanctions being imposed by the Committee on Members' staff, even if they are to be directly employed by the House authorities.

Finally, given the large turnover of Members' staff, it would be no bad thing for some Members to remind their staff of the confidential nature of Select Committees and all their deliberations. Leaks to journalists, or for that matter to anyone else, undermine not only the work of Select Committees but the whole of Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House

(1) approves the Seventh Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (House of Commons Paper No. 501);

(2) endorses the recommendations in paragraphs 49, 54, 73 and 85 of the Report; and

(3) accordingly instructs the Serjeant at Arms and the Director of Parliamentary Information and Communications Technology to withdraw access to the House and its facilities from Mr Stephen Lotinga for a period of 14 days, and from Mr Tom Smith for a period of 28 days.

Health Bill [*Lords*]

Second Reading

4.54 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As first days in a new job go, there must have been easier ones than this, but it is very good to be back and to be supported by an excellent new or nearly new team, in time to bring to the House a Bill that I can modestly claim to have had some hand in creating.

First, let me summarise what I think the Bill does. Building on last year's 60th anniversary celebrations, it begins a new era in the national health service, in which quality becomes the focus of everything that the NHS does; the drive for quality is predominantly locally and staff led rather than dropped from on high; patients have more rights, choice and control over their care; prevention and health promotion truly come to the fore; and further reform can take place against the knowledge that NHS principles and values are secure and that the NHS will endure as the preferred British model throughout the century.

We build on a position of strength, banking the huge progress that the NHS has made in the past decade, but setting out a new direction for continued improvement in the next. By way of context, let me remind the House of some of the key developments of recent years.

In the past 12 years, the NHS estate has been transformed, with 100 new hospitals. NHS finances are secure, with more than a £1.7 billion surplus and only six trusts in deficit. Hospital-acquired infections are being tackled, with MRSA rates down 65 per cent. on 2003 figures. We now have the shortest waits in the history of the NHS, moving from the scandal of 18-month waits for operations to the landmark pledge that all patients are now seen in 18 weeks. On average, patients now wait only eight weeks for treatment and are seen by a specialist in two weeks if cancer is suspected.

Public satisfaction with the NHS is at a record high. The Care Quality Commission's adult in-patient survey found that 93 per cent. of patients rated their overall care as good or better. That is conclusive proof that the NHS is Labour's great achievement, and its revival in the past decade is arguably the Government's greatest success story, which I intend to tell with pride and energy every day that I do the job.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford) (Lab): May I be the first to congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new post? I am sure that he will do a splendid job, building on the amazing work that has already happened in the health service. Far from 18 weeks being the target, many people in my area are seen well before that. When I, as a practising GP, see somebody with suspected cancer, I can often get them seen in a few days. That was unthinkable five years ago. I therefore congratulate my right hon. Friend and the whole team on such a remarkable achievement.

Andy Burnham: I always bow to the wisdom of my hon. Friend. When I occupied the Minister of State position in the Department, I often talked about the 18-week commitment as the end of waiting lists. Conservative Members greeted that with derision, but that has happened, and my hon. Friend knows that better than anybody.

That success and the others that I listed are due in no small part to the skill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), who—to paraphrase the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—is the postman who delivered. The Bill takes forward my right hon. Friend's excellent work and that of my noble Friend Lord Darzi of Denham, providing the legal framework for the reforms proposed in the NHS next stage review, which was published almost a year ago.

Mr. Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): May I be the first Conservative Member to congratulate the Secretary of State on his elevation? While revering his predecessor and his work in the Department, will he kindly undertake, as one of his first steps, a review of his predecessor's decision in the past month to scrap the community hospital redevelopment fund building programme of some £500 million? It was announced to our strategic health authority, at great cost to the plans for redeveloping Ludlow community hospital.

Andy Burnham: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's reverence—I will be doing well if I get close to such praise. Obviously, I have not had time to examine that particular decision. I give the hon. Gentleman a commitment that I will do so and write to him.

The first chapter of the Bill relates to the NHS constitution and provides for further improving quality and giving patients greater say about their care. The Bill places a duty on all providers of NHS services to have regard to the first ever NHS constitution. It will also require the Secretary of State to review the constitution every 10 years and to report on its impact every three years.

The constitution is a landmark document. It sets out the rights and responsibilities of patients and staff, bringing together existing legal rights with commitments to deliver the standards of service that patients can expect from the national health service. However, the constitution is far more than a piece of paper. It provides three concrete legal rights for patients: first, the right to recommended vaccines under a national immunisation programme; secondly, the right to all National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence-recommended drugs and treatments; and thirdly, the right to make choices about NHS care and the right to the information needed to make those choices.

The constitution belongs to every one of us. It reflects what people, patients and staff say they want to see in a 21st-century health service, and it commits the NHS to delivering on that promise, now and in the future. By placing a legal duty on all providers of NHS services to have regard to the constitution, we are reaffirming the right of patients to access the best possible treatment, while ensuring that the fundamental principles of the NHS are protected for future generations.

The proposal for an NHS constitution was the central recommendation of a report that I published for the then Secretary of State for Health, following a period of shadowing work at every level of the system. It is a pleasure to see the constitution as the centrepiece of the Bill, and I was encouraged by the wide welcome that it received when the Bill was in another place.

To improve the focus on quality, the Bill will place a legal duty on all NHS providers to provide annual quality accounts, in the same way that they are required to publish financial accounts. That information will be in the public domain, so that patients will have clear information on the quality of care provided by local health services. Lord Darzi's definition of quality includes patient experience. The quality accounts will therefore cover not only the quality of clinical care, but whether patients feel that they have been treated with dignity and respect.

As Lord Darzi has pointed out, the NHS is good at invention, but it can be slow to adopt new technologies and treatments, and the spread of new ideas is variable. We are taking several measures to foster a more innovative culture in the NHS. NHS Evidence provides all the clinical and non-clinical evidence on new treatments and best practice in one place, through one easily accessible portal. The £220 million strategic health authority regional innovation funds will help front-line staff to develop, grow and spread new ideas, delivering genuine improvements in the quality of care that people receive. The Bill will provide further support for innovation by enabling the Secretary of State to make payments, as prizes, to promote innovation in health services. Innovation prizes will reward those front-line staff who have excelled and will encourage others to do likewise.

In order to give patients more choice and control over the care that they receive, the Bill brings forward measures that will enable the NHS to pilot direct payments, as part of a wider programme of piloting personal health budgets. Personal health budgets could work in many ways. The NHS is already setting up pilots where the personal budget is not physically held by the patient—rather, there is a notional amount—or where it is held by a third party on the patient's behalf. However, where it makes sense, we also want to allow the option of direct cash payments to patients. The Bill provides powers for that, building on the experience of direct payments in social care, which have transformed the lives of many people over the past decade.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his new post. Help the Aged, the British Medical Association and others have expressed concern about direct payments, which are to be piloted as part of the new personal health budget initiative. Will direct payments in any way remove patients' human rights, and what happens to any underspend from them? Does it stay with the patient or does the patient pay it back to the NHS? There are genuine concerns about direct payments, so can we have a lot more meat on this bone?

Andy Burnham: I would say quite the reverse. The introduction of payments could help patients to secure their fundamental rights, particularly those that I mentioned earlier, as set out in the NHS constitution. I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, however, and there is a need to proceed cautiously. I looked at the issue when I was Minister of State in the Department, and I felt that although the idea had merit, there was a need to proceed cautiously. However, that is exactly what the Department is doing, with a programme of 70 pilots beginning next year. So we will listen carefully and work cautiously. The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Phil Hope) has done such good work in social care to unlock the benefits for patients of having more control over their care, and we now feel that there is merit in proceeding in this direction,

[Andy Burnham]

especially when we can bring the two budgets together for people with particularly complex health and social care needs.

We are not being prescriptive nationally about how and where personal health budgets or direct payments should be used. Many of the primary care trusts that have applied to join the pilot programme believe that the arrangements could have the greatest impact for people with long-term conditions or mental health needs, but a range of innovative ideas is under consideration. However, we have set out a clear policy framework and guiding principles for how all types of personal budget will operate. Any budget should be spent on goods and services agreed in a care plan on which it is appropriate for the NHS to spend money, and there should be high quality advice and support to help people to manage their budgets properly. In the case of direct payments, the Bill and subsequent regulations will provide explicit safeguards. There will also be a robust evaluation to assess how personal budgets and direct payments can best improve the quality of care for patients.

Dr. Stoate: While my right hon. Friend is on the subject of direct payments, will he clarify what would happen if a patient decided to spend their budget on a clinically ineffective regime that did not deliver the goods? Might not that result in a fall-back on the NHS, which would have to pick up the pieces or repair the damage caused by ineffective or harmful treatments?

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend raises a reasonable point, but as I said a moment ago, authorisation for direct payments will be given only for services that NHS money is normally used for, and they will form part of a care plan that will have been signed off by a clinician or a health service manager. Actually, there must be a role for the GP in this. *[Laughter.]* My hon. Friend is always looking for work. Perhaps GPs will be able to play a guiding role in helping people to explore options that might not be readily available through mainstream care. Obviously, we shall want to tease out all these points and, as I said to the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) a moment ago, we shall proceed cautiously in order to pick up precisely the kind of concern that my hon. Friend has just raised.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment at the Department of Health. He talked about the evaluation of the personal budget pilots. Will the outcomes of the evaluation be published before anything is rolled out across the NHS?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee for his kind congratulations. This is an issue on which I have not yet taken a firm view. I have seen the list of pilot projects; I believe that they exist in every SHA region and in many primary care trust areas. I hear what my right hon. Friend says and I believe that there should be careful analysis of what the pilots tell us before there is any rush in this direction. It is also important to acknowledge at this point that different issues arise in respect of health care and of social care. Health care can often involve more specialised or complex services that might require a critical mass of patients to support their continuation, for example. These are precisely the kind of issues that the pilots will test, and I give him a commitment that we will proceed with caution and, wherever possible, publish information as we go along.

In the case of direct payments, the Bill and subsequent regulations will provide explicit safeguards. There will also be evaluation. The Bill will ensure that direct payments could be extended more widely only in the light of evaluation and with the active approval of Parliament. I hope that that will give my right hon. Friend further reassurance; Parliament would have to endorse any further development of direct payments.

The second part of the Bill establishes a new regime for NHS providers that have been performing badly despite interventions by primary care trusts, the strategic health authority or the appropriate regulatory body. The vast majority of trusts perform well, but in the rare instances where that is not the case, there must be transparent processes in place to deal with poor performance.

The Bill outlines the following measures, which would be taken only as a last resort and when other measures have failed. In such circumstances, the trust board would be immediately suspended and the Secretary of State would appoint an independent trust specialist administrator to review and consult patients, public and staff on the organisation's future. Recommendations would be made to the Secretary of State, who would report to Parliament the final decision about the organisation's future. These measures will provide protection against the possibility of allowing NHS providers that have consistently failed patients to continue indefinitely.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on becoming Secretary of State for Health. Will he explain who would trigger the occurrence that he described? If, for instance, people disagreed fervently with a decision about a foundation hospital, who would trigger the decision about how to proceed? Would it have to be the Government or could the public be involved in it?

Andy Burnham: In the legal context, Monitor, as the authorising body of foundation trusts, would be responsible. The public could, of course, be involved and one hopes that a foundation trust would have developed better mechanisms for public engagement and consultation. Any information that came through that route would inform any decision that Monitor reached. As I say, Monitor is the decision maker in this context.

The administrator would review and consult patients and staff on the organisation's future and then make recommendations to the Secretary of State. We believe these measures will provide protection against the possibility of NHS providers continuing indefinitely.

The National Health Service Act 2006 placed restrictions on the amount of income foundations trusts can earn from private patients. The private patient cap is automatically set at the proportion of private patient work a trust did in 2002-03. It was introduced because of the understandable concern that foundation trusts might expand private patient activity at the expense of the NHS. These concerns are still relevant today. Private care must not be delivered on NHS premises to the detriment of NHS patients, but the implementation of the cap has raised complex issues for some foundation trusts, which need to be resolved.

An amendment was tabled in the other place to give the Secretary of State the right to grant exceptions to the rule that limits the amount of income a foundation trust can generate from private work, but I do not believe that this is the right solution. Striking the right balance between protecting NHS services for NHS patients and allowing foundation trusts the flexibility they need to operate in the interests of patients is a complex issue. There is no quick fix to implement, particularly without widespread consultation with the NHS.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham) (Con): I add my congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman, and I hope that he enjoys his tenure until the end of this Parliament. He refers to the income that foundation trusts can receive from treating private patients. I have received some briefing material from the Foundation Trust Network, one of whose chairmen is my constituent. The briefing points out that there are some perverse impacts on foundation trusts stemming from the cap on private patient income, which effectively limits some of the Government's own proposals for the health service. I do not want to get into a Committee stage debate, but will the Secretary of State provide an indication of what scope there will be to ensure that the cap no longer creates such perverse incentives?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's congratulations. I have some aspirations to stay beyond the next general election—who knows; we will see. She raises a very fair point and it is also fair to say that my predecessor had acknowledged that although we did not want to accept what we saw as a quick fix from the other place, we nevertheless believe that there is a case to review the operation of the cap and how it affects foundation trusts. We appreciate that many trusts are in very different positions in view of their case mix, and we would like to work with the Foundation Trust Network to explore those issues as part of the review. As I say, we are committed to looking again at the cap's operation, but we think it would be better done through a wider process of consultation with the NHS rather than by simply accepting the amendment from the other place.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I join others in welcoming the Secretary of State to his new position. I shall say a bit more about that in a short while.

As a Back Bencher, the Secretary of State contributed to the debate on the private income cap during the Report stage of the Bill that became the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003. He therefore knows about this issue. He must be aware that the way in which the cap is biting on foundation trusts that are also mental health trusts, which have had virtually no private income, is preventing them from supplying services to, for example, the private companies that are acting as employment providers under the new deal. It is having potentially significant perverse effects.

I hope that the Secretary of State has noted that his noble Friend Lord Warner, who moved the relevant clause back in 2003, said in another place on 12 May this year:

> "I was the Minister who moved the offending clause... I repent my sins." —[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 May 2009; Vol. 710, c. 936.]

Will the Secretary of State at least tell the House now, on Second Reading, that he will not exclude the possibility of leaving the Bill as it is in this respect, so that Ministers can make the necessary regulations in the future? If he does not do that, he may close off the possibility of a change in the primary legislation.

Andy Burnham: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his congratulations, and look forward to crossing swords with him once again. I have enjoyed many exchanges with him in television studios and across the Floor of the House, and I am sure that I shall do so again.

I did indeed read Lord Warner's words in preparation for today's debate, and they obviously carry considerable weight, given the position that he held in the Department and his role in the Bill's passage. I am also aware of the particular position of mental health trusts, not just in terms of their relationship with bodies working for the Department for Work and Pensions or, as the hon. Gentleman said, with the new deal, but in terms of their relationship with local authorities and other parts of the public sector.

The hon. Gentleman is right to identify issues that need to be examined. That is why we set up the review. As his intervention demonstrated, this is a complex issue, and, especially given my recent arrival, I do not think that it would be wise for me to make a snap judgment today on whether to accept an amendment from the Lords. However, I give the hon. Gentleman a commitment to work through the issue, and I suspect that, with his engagement and that of the Foundation Trust Network, we shall be able to reach the right place.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): May I express a counter-balancing view? I am not at all sure that my right hon. Friend will be able to "reach the right place". I think that the fact that NHS institutions—foundation trusts—carry out private procedures is a distraction from their core business. I am saddened that they continue to do that, and extremely saddened that they now want to bust the cap—a bit like universities with top-up fees—and get away with charging more for private services. I urge my right hon. Friend to go in the other direction and ban the whole thing.

Andy Burnham: That intervention illustrates why I am not going to jump in feet first and say something that I might regret. It also illustrates that there are strong views on both sides of the debate. However, I think my hon. Friend would agree that we would not want the operation of the cap to stand in the way of improvement of NHS services if it could be demonstrated that that could be achieved, particularly where NHS trusts—especially mental health trusts—might wish to work in closer partnership with other parts of the public sector. Those are the issues that we shall have to tease out in the review. As I have said, it will be a thorough review, so that NHS and other key stakeholders can be properly consulted and we can ensure that any new proposals are workable and have broad support from managers, staff and patients.

The Bill also amends powers in relation to public appointments. The Secretary of State currently has powers to suspend chairs and non-executive directors of primary care and other NHS trusts. The Bill extends

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those powers to cover chairs and non-executive directors of strategic health authorities, relevant arm's length bodies, and other bodies concerned with health. As with other responsibilities relating to public appointments that rest solely with the Secretary of State, this power will be delegated to the Appointments Commission.

The third part of the Bill reforms the process by which primary care trusts commission pharmaceutical services—I feel right away that the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) and I will be picking up a debate we had some time ago about how best to drive improvement in the pharmacy sector, and I respect the huge experience she has in the subject. It grants PCTs additional powers to deal with poor performers, including the right to issue remedial notices and to withhold payments from contractors who do not meet minimum standards. The Bill will also permit primary care trusts to provide pharmaceutical services themselves in an emergency such as a flu pandemic or where there is no suitable alternative.

The Bill also makes changes to the social care complaints system, enabling people who pay for their own care to refer any complaints to the local government ombudsman, just as those who receive free care from their local authority are currently able to do. I think the House will accept that that closes the long-standing loophole whereby self-funders have not been allowed to make complaints in the same way.

The Bill also gives a firmer legal footing to the transfer of anonymised data on doctors' and dentists' pay from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to UK health departments. These data have been shared between HMRC and UK health departments for more than 20 years and form a vital part of the evidence that goes to the Doctors and Dentists Review Body on pay.

Let me turn to the final aspect of the Bill. It is becoming increasingly clear that the big challenges to the health of the nation are rooted in our lifestyles, and that if we want to build a sustainable NHS, we must now put as much focus on preventing illness as on treating it.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am aware that this part of the Bill addresses tobacco control and protection for children in relation to tobacco, but is it not time that we looked at protecting children in other respects as well, because they are particularly at risk from both tattooists and piercers? Currently, there are no minimum age limits for children having piercing of their genitals, navels, nipples, mouth, nose, eyebrows and ears. There are also no minimum training qualifications and no skills qualifications for those who carry out such piercing. Should we not also be looking at the risks to children from such tattoos or piercing, which include the danger of infection, bleeding, complications and the need for plastic surgery? Should we not be updating the NHS to take account of such new risks to our young people?

Andy Burnham: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. I am always on the side of the argument that says we must give maximum protection to young people. I think I am correct in saying that there is currently a minimum age for having a tattoo, and I can assure my hon. Friend that I have no plans to change that. However, I know that she and other Members have raised the issue of piercing before, and I undertake to meet her to discuss her concerns more fully.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion. We all want people to live longer and to lead healthy lifestyles, but does he not share my concern that there might be an unintended consequence of particularly the health promotion aspect of the Bill in relation to tobacco advertising and the display of products, in that local convenience stores and small shops may well close? Of course the right balance must be struck and I agree that we need health promotion, but we must also bear it in mind that most small shop owners are responsible and undertake their duties in a lawful way, and that in order to survive they need to sell products and to provide products to the wider community.

Andy Burnham: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I can confirm that it would never be my intention to make it harder for small retailers to survive; I do not think anybody would want that. Nevertheless, we have to act to counter the fact that many young people still take up smoking, and if we in this House can take measures to reduce that, we have a responsibility to consider them. It is my judgment that this can be done without causing the effect on small businesses that the hon. Gentleman described, provided that we can find the right point of balance so that we do not put an unfair burden on small shops. I hope the hon. Gentleman will work with us to find that point, because we still have some way to go before we reduce smoking rates among young people to a level that we would find acceptable.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment; I am sure that he will make an excellent Secretary of State, and I hope that he also proves to be a tolerant one. Is he aware that in Canada, Iceland and Thailand, which are the only countries to have introduced a comprehensive retail display ban, there is no evidence to suggest that it has had any effect on youth smoking rates or consumption? Indeed, the Prime Minister of New Zealand has ruled out such a ban, stating:

"There's no international evidence it actually works".

On what basis is my right hon. Friend taking this measure forward?

Andy Burnham: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's kind words of congratulation. I stand to be corrected, but what I read of the evidence over the weekend suggests to me that in both Iceland and Canada measures to restrict point of sale materials did have an effect on smoking prevalence among young people. In Iceland, the fall in smoking prevalence among 15 to 16-year-olds between 1999 and 2007 was most rapid in the period immediately following the display ban introduced in 2001—smoking prevalence for that age group fell by more than 40 per cent. during that period. I would argue that it is not correct to say that there is no evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of this proposal, but I agree that it should be introduced in a way that does not make it even harder for small shops to trade. We all have concerns about the high streets in our constituencies, the community facilities and the community shops and services. It is not our intention to make those

commercial pressures even greater; nevertheless there are steps we could take to reduce smoking among young people. Where there is evidence to suggest that things that we could do could have an effect, we are duty-bound to consider them.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): In addition to that, will the Secretary of State try, whenever he can, to make the point to those who smoke that they should try never to be the first person to light up in any group and that they should try not to smoke in front of someone younger than them?

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point.

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): I join others in welcoming the Secretary of State to his new job—it is a very important one. The debate about how one prevents young people from becoming addicted to a harmful substance, be it tobacco, alcohol or another harmful drug, is difficult. While respecting the rights of adults to make choices about those products, will he give an undertaking that, first, everything he proposes will be evidence based and, secondly, that he will always seek all-party agreement, via the Select Committee and through other means, to ensure that we proceed with maximum consensus on such difficult issues? As we all know, young people can find ways around regulations as easily as anybody.

Andy Burnham: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that consideration, but what I ask in return is that if we give the evidence a thorough test in Committee and find that proof exists for certain action, the House does not then find other excuses not to take such action. Like me, I do not think that he is comfortable about the prevalence of smoking among young people in our constituencies. I think that there is more we can do to cut the number of young people smoking, and if that can be done, the effects on their standard of health will be huge. We must take this important issue incredibly seriously.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new appointment. We must recognise how powerful and influential the tobacco lobby is. At every stage it challenges causation, manufactures uncertainty and hides behind third-party organisations—Save Our Shop is funded by the Tobacco Manufacturers Association. As the very last resort, it will drag its feet against the inevitable—what Philip Morris calls throwing grit into the gears of regulatory reform.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which stresses the need—perhaps this goes back to what the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) said—for us to examine the evidence and put aside some of the vested interests. I will argue strongly that if we can take steps to reduce the level of smoking among young people, we should always do so.

Smoking remains the leading cause of preventable death in this country. Although the number of people who smoke in England is at an all-time low, there are still too many young people taking up smoking.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion. Will he think again about the ban on tobacco display, which is a triumph for the nanny state? The most recent evidence that the Department of Health itself commissioned on this subject showed that brand awareness was not a factor in influencing young people to smoke compared with other social, economic and family background factors. He said that he does not want to damage small businesses, and that is reassuring, but his Department says that it will cost at least £1,000 a store to implement this proposal. It is gesture politics of the worst kind: will he think about it again?

Andy Burnham: I will think about it, but I would just point out that during the life of this Government we have taken measures to restrict the promotion of tobacco and control exposure to it. At every point in that journey, the voices from the Opposition Benches have cried, "Nanny state!" Almost every time that a sensible measure has been proposed to tackle smoking, especially under-age smoking, we have heard those voices. If we had listened to them, we would not have reduced the proportion of people who smoke from 28 per cent. in 1997 to 21 per cent. in 2007. On this issue, the calls from the Opposition do not have credibility. Without those measures, we would not have had that progress—*[Interruption.]* The noise is rising from the Opposition, but we will stand firm on this issue.

The total number of deaths caused by smoking in this country is more than the number of deaths from diabetes, road traffic accidents, suicide and drug and alcohol related causes combined. Some 8.5 million adults still smoke, and some two thirds took up the habit when they were under the age of 18. Some 200,000 11 to 15-year-olds smoke, which is a major cause of health inequality. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to become smokers.

Since the tobacco advertising ban, the main conduit for marketing cigarettes to children is through retail displays in shops. There was a full and impassioned debate on this issue in the other place, where the full range of views was set out and discussed. Their lordships have thoroughly scrutinised evidence on the benefits and costs of our proposals, and their conclusion—by an overwhelming majority—is that we should act now in accordance with the measures set out in the Bill.

Mr. Lansley: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the reduction in the prevalence of smoking was greater in the 1980s, under the Conservative Government, than it has been at any other time in the last 50 years, because of the impact of the increase in the price of cigarettes? The increase in prices in Iceland had the same impact.

We believe that evidence exists to support the proposition that we should ban tobacco vending machines in the public areas of licensed premises. Why are the Government resisting that suggestion?

Andy Burnham: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I do not wish to make a party political point—*[Interruption.]* I normally do, but not on this occasion. I remember the time of "The Health of the Nation" in the early 1990s, and progress was made in reducing smoking, but there was a real acceleration in 1997, with the introduction of smoking cessation courses and nicotine

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patches being made available to people. When tackling an issue of this magnitude, it gets harder and harder the lower we seek to go. The cut that I mentioned in the number of people smoking is a real and appreciable difference that will bring real health benefits to the people concerned and the national health service for years to come.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, I shall discuss vending machines shortly. If I pick up the drift of his question, he wants us to go even further than is proposed in the Bill. I hope that he will discuss with his colleagues the possible effect of that on small businesses, but let us have the debate.

People ask about the evidence. A study published in 2008 by Cancer Research UK reviewed two decades' worth of research on the influence that point-of-sale displays have on smoking among young people. The collective conclusion of these studies is that point-of-sale displays not only encourage children who already smoke to make impulse purchases of cigarettes, but encourage children who have never smoked to take up the habit.

Research by leading academics at Stanford university's school of medicine, published in 2004, showed that removing point-of-sale displays and advertising could reduce the likelihood of smoking among children and young people by as much as 50 per cent., even when other factors, such as parental smoking, are taken into account. Point-of-sale displays in the US are much more prominent than they are in the UK, but even if this legislation had only a 10th of the impact that it is estimated to have had in the US, it would still mean that 3,000 fewer children would become smokers each year—*[Interruption.]* I hear the muttering from the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). If he is talking of the nanny state and saying that it is not worth doing, then shame on him.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give us his forecast of how many people might not become smokers if the point-of-sale measure goes through? What other measures is his Department considering in order to have even more success in reducing smoking?

Andy Burnham: The Department is considering a broader review of tobacco control policy later this year. We will be able to provide the right hon. Gentleman with a fuller answer then. I agree with the shadow Secretary of State that vending machines are an important part of the debate—we need to have that debate—but it is also important to act proportionately and to ensure that we consider the legitimate needs of small businesses when making any changes.

To give retailers time to prepare, the point-of-sale provisions will not come into force until October 2011 for larger businesses and 2013 for smaller shops. I hope that that responds to the concerns raised by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). That will allow smaller retailers time to adjust, refit their shops when their old displays are due to be replaced anyway and limit as far as possible additional costs.

The Bill will also create powers to control the sale of cigarettes to children and young people through vending machines. Cigarette machines represent 1 per cent. of the overall cigarette market, but 17 per cent. of 11 to 15-year-olds describe them as their usual source of tobacco. Initially, we will introduce stricter controls to ensure that only adults can purchase cigarettes through vending machines, but if those restrictions fail to stop underage sales we will consider banning vending machines outright.

In conclusion, the NHS is both transformed and transforming as an institution. This journey of reform has seen our priorities evolve over time. There have been three phases of reform. In the wake of the 2000 NHS plan, when the focus was on building capacity and driving up core standards, we needed the discipline and focus that centrally agreed targets confer. Following that, the focus rightly switched from numbers to process, as we took steps to introduce greater diversity and flexibility into the system, pushing power down to local organisations and enabling the NHS to look outwards to the communities it serves rather than upwards to Whitehall. Now, with Ara Darzi's "Next Stage Review" and this Bill, we are opening up a third era of reform for the NHS, one that is focused on people—patients and staff—and that empowers clinicians and staff as the driving force of reform. It will all be backed by an NHS constitution, securing the values and principles of our national health service for future generations. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.39 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Once again, I welcome the Secretary of State to his new responsibilities. When he went to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, he said that it was his dream job. I am sorry that we may turn his short tenure at the Department of Health into a bit more of a nightmare, but I hope that he will maintain the merit of consistency. As I noted in an intervention, the Secretary of State has already taken a consistent approach in trying to restrict foundation trusts from extending their private income cap.

The Secretary of State is consistent on a number of issues. When he first went to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in February last year, he gave an interview to *The Daily Telegraph*. Surveying the artwork on the wall of his new office, he told the journalist:

"That's very Purnell, and it's going to have to go."

The right hon. Gentleman has done it once, and now he is doing it again.

I welcome, too, the Ministers of State, the hon. and learned Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) and the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), to their new responsibilities. I wish the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), well in the Secretary of State for Health's former dream job and I wish the Minister for Children, the right hon. Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo), well in her new responsibilities.

I am sure that he is far too busy to listen, but I say a fond farewell to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), who has gone to the Home Office. Of course, Labour Members may be wishing that the new Home Secretary occupies his post for only a short period before he goes on to other things. When Kirsty Young asked the duly modest right hon. Gentleman whether he thought he had leadership potential, he said:

"I don't think I would have been good enough, frankly. I don't think I've got the capabilities."

Just a word to the right hon. Gentleman: that did not seem to hold back the present incumbent, so why should it hold him back? Perhaps even before I sit down, others will be encouraging him.

I had not quite understood that the new Home Secretary was so in tune with what was happening in the national health service. So in tune was he that he must have noticed that the average tenure of a chief executive in the NHS is now 23 months. Lo and behold, 23 months after he took up his post at the Department of Health, he left to go elsewhere.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): Solidarity.

Mr. Lansley: Indeed; we can see solidarity in the approach.

The Health Secretary may already have determined the departmental responsibilities of his team, but may I make one suggestion in passing?

Andy Burnham: Must you?

Mr. Lansley: Yes, I must. The Secretary of State said that he sees the promotion of health and the prevention of disease as his top priority. The Opposition have been making suggestions to the Government for a long time, and they have accepted many of our proposals. May I make a proposal about something we have been on about for a long time? As Secretary of State, he should not make public health the responsibility of another Minister in his Department, but should make it his responsibility. Although I hope that his tenure as Secretary of State is short, he will realise that none the less there is an opportunity to do good if he takes public health into his own hands. There are certainly issues about the development of Change4Life and the public health programme that need to be pushed forward quickly if it is to have the success we all wish for it.

The Bill owes something to the Secretary of State's past tenure at the Department of Health. He followed one of the proposals my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and I made about greater operational independence for the NHS and the need for it to have a constitution. He echoed those thoughts, and said that a constitution and more operational independence for the NHS would be a good thing.

Andy Burnham *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: Before the right hon. Gentleman interrupts, I should point out that he went on to differentiate operational independence from a constitution and ended up saying that a constitution would be a good thing but that although he wanted operational independence it did not seem to be such a good thing.

Andy Burnham: I found myself getting very frustrated on the many occasions when, while doing my dream job down the road, I heard the hon. Gentleman claim credit for the NHS constitution. If he looks at the record, he will see that I proposed it a long time before he first spoke of it. I would be grateful if he did not keep making the wrongful claim that he was the originator of the NHS constitution. If he looks back, I think that he will see that I first proposed it a good year before he did.

Mr. Lansley: Let me agree this with the new Secretary of State: we will not have a debate about who proposed a constitution; we will just agree that there should be one, but let us agree that it ought to be a real constitution. The new Secretary of State embraces the thought that there should be a constitution, but what he has found in the Bill that he has inherited is not really a constitution at all but a declaratory statement. It simply declares that there are a range of legislative provisions and promises made by the Government that apply to the national health service, that those should be published in a document, and that the document should be called a constitution. As hon. Members will know, a constitution has to have certain characteristics. When the Government see a constitution in Europe, they deny that it is such a thing. When they see something that is not a constitution and it suits their political purposes to decree that it is a constitution, they do so.

What we are being offered in the Bill is not, in truth, a constitution, but that is what we ought to be offered. The new Secretary of State wanted greater operational independence for the NHS and believed that it would be important; it is precisely what he said was needed, but it is not enshrined in the constitution in the Bill. In effect, for the NHS, the constitution still enshrines the same principle of the legislative relationship between the NHS and the Secretary of State, which is that the NHS is at any moment whatever the Secretary of State chooses to make it. The Secretary of State can change the definition with the stroke of a pen—literally.

Mr. Redwood: Does my hon. Friend agree that if hon. Members read the constitution to see whether their constituents will have any more rights under it—for example, more rights to high-quality service or faster or better treatment—they will see that it is all such weasel words that there is no enhancement of constituents' rights to a decent service?

Mr. Lansley: Yes, my right hon. Friend is quite right about that. Let us take one example: where in the constitution, if rights to treatment are so important, is the right of access to NHS dentistry? It does not exist. The Secretary of State says that there is a right of access to NHS treatments as recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, but that is only precisely the same legislative provision that was put into a statutory instrument years ago, and it is a right that all our constituents have had breached time and again. There is nothing new whatever in the constitution that changes that statutory provision.

If one wants a constitution, it has to do what constitutions do: define the duties, responsibilities and accountabilities of the organisations within the NHS. I am afraid that that opportunity has not been taken in the Bill. In that sense, it is a clear wasted opportunity. We know that we will need to restore to patients the clear voice that was abolished when the community health councils were abolished, that was further undermined under patients forums, and that has not been restored under local involvement networks, or LINks, especially at a national level.

We will have to create the mechanisms by which commissioners and providers can be properly separated, because the legislation to do it is simply not there. We know that primary care trusts in parts of the country

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are trying to create a separation between their commissioning activities and their provider activities, but legislation prevents them from doing so. Have the Government created an opportunity in the Bill for that important constitutional change to be made? No, they have not. Have they put back into legislation what they took out in 1999—the opportunity for general practitioners on the front line to be able to exercise real commissioning responsibilities? No, they have not. They leave that with primary care trusts.

I am afraid that the Government's approach in the Bill has not been to take the opportunity to entrench in constitutional form the kind of accountabilities and responsibilities that would go with the reform process that the NHS is really looking for. The new Secretary of State must remember his former boss, Tony Blair, making a speech about the character of what was required for reform in the national health service, because he became a Minister in the Department of Health at almost the same moment. If I recall correctly, that speech was made in June 2006, just when the Secretary of State took up his post as Minister. It was probably part of his instructions from No. 10 to go in and try to push the reform process. I think that was part of his responsibilities as a Minister. It was about accelerating patient choice, extending practice-based commissioning, completing the transfer of NHS trusts to foundation trusts, and stimulating additional capacity for the NHS through the independent sector. Those were the four drivers of reform that Tony Blair talked about.

What has happened? All four have stalled. The last Secretary of State did not deliver on patient choice. It went up by just 3 per cent. Only 3 per cent. more patients believed that they had patient choice. Most of the time, less than 50 per cent. of patients felt that they had choice when they were offered elective operations.

The Audit Commission has demonstrated that practice-based commissioning has stalled. I talk to GPs across the country who say that it is not happening. The primary care trusts, in effect, feel that they have been told by the Department of Health that they can take complete control of commissioning again and close GPs out of it. The NHS trusts were all supposed to have become foundation trusts by December 2008, but they are coming through only one at a time.

The independent sector has been dissuaded from additional investment because the recently departed Secretary of State told them that, as far as he was concerned, the issue was one of capacity, not of competition. The Government believed that in many parts of the country they had sufficient capacity in the hospital sector and therefore that they did not need the independent sector any more. They feel that they can turn the independent sector on and off like a tap.

The reform processes for which the new Secretary of State used to be responsible have all stalled. The Bill does nothing to drive any of them forward or to provide the drive, the pace and the institutional architecture that would help to entrench the reform process for the longer term.

I turn to what is in the Bill, as opposed to what should be but is not in it. On direct payments, if the new Secretary of State and I are debating who was in favour and who was not in favour of parts of the Bill, he will concede that in January 2006 the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), flatly rejected the possibility of extending direct payments from social care to embrace aspects of health care, which we were arguing for at the time. She said that that was inconsistent with the NHS principles and that it was revisiting the patient's passport. The right hon. Gentleman says that as a Minister he considered direct payments—but presumably turned down the idea—so he was no doubt embracing that thought. I am glad that there has been a change of view on his part and that of the Government. We will support the proposal, but we must make sure that it is done well—not only cautiously, but well—and that the institutions in the health service that are charged with it do not try to frustrate it.

I am seriously worried that, in their commissioning of NHS continuing care and some of the joint purchasing of social care, PCTs are going through purchasing structures like reverse e-auctions, the effect of which is to deny those who enjoy personal budgets the possibility of using them in ways that are flexible and responsive to their needs, rather than precisely as predetermined by the primary care trust.

On quality accounts, the Secretary of State knows that we share the view that quality needs to drive the activities of the national health service, but we must be aware, as must the right hon. Gentleman, that too often commissioning in the NHS has been on the basis of cost and volume not quality. After his predecessor's unhappy experiences with the Healthcare Commission's reports on Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells and on the Mid Staffordshire Foundation Trust, it is clear that in both cases the primary care trust was pursuing an approach of commissioning for cost and volume, not for quality. Quality is very important.

It is difficult to be sure that quality accounts will, of themselves, deliver such quality. Let us take an example. In the case of the Mid Staffordshire Foundation Trust, we know that many organisations, including the Department of Health, treated compliance with a four-hour target as a measure of quality in the handling of admissions to the emergency department at Stafford general hospital. The Department and its fellow organisations, such as Monitor, published a document to tell us what quality accounts might look like. It is helpfully entitled, "The Sunnyview University Hospital Trust". I have a copy.

In the Department's lexicon of communications, if something is called the Sunnyview document, everybody will no doubt treat it as an optimistic document. Unfortunately, when one looks at the document to see what quality accounts on emergency care would mean, one sees that it focuses on targets. It says that the measure of quality is adherence to the four-hour target, but we know that that target is only one measure, and an insufficient measure in the experience of the Stafford general hospital, because the staff there said that in order to meet that measure, they had to compromise the quality of patient care—not support quality or deliver that care, but compromise it.

Mr. Redwood: Has my hon. Friend noticed that there is now only one Labour Back Bencher in the Chamber for this important Bill on the Government's flagship subject? Does he think that they are unaware that their Prime Minister would like them to be here supporting the new Secretary of State?

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I think Labour Members are more concerned with the health of their party than they are with the health of the population. That is a matter of regret. Let us recall that the Bill was meant to be a flagship piece of legislation, but they decided some time ago that it was not a flagship, but a rather small tender. *[Laughter.]* The silent one on the Government Bench found his voice.

When the Secretary of State was a Minister, he said that from 2009 there should be fewer national targets. One of the things that he could do, even in the space of the next few months, if he has so long, is dispense with those targets. If he believes, as he said in the past that he does, that people in the NHS felt frustrated by the weight of central top-down targets and bureaucracy, he should let go. Let him take away the four-hour target and see what can be arrived at by way of a series of measures of quality of emergency care in emergency departments agreed between commissioners and hospitals. Let us see whether the result is an improvement or a reduction in quality of care. My belief is that it would be an improvement.

Among other measures, the Secretary of State referred to trust special administrators. He will recall from the 2003 legislation that the Government promised to put in place a transparent failure regime. They have not done so. It was always clear that what was required was a failure regime that made transparent to those who were lending to the NHS and were the potential creditors of the NHS what would happen in the event of a financial failure. The Government have simply said that, in place of a presumption under existing legislation that all the protected assets of a foundation trust would be taken under control and the creditors left with virtually nothing, the whole of the foundation trust would be de-authorised, turned back into an NHS trust and taken back into the control of the NHS.

It is clear that we must protect the assets and services that are necessary for the delivery of NHS care. Alongside that, if there is to be an opportunity for foundation trusts to do as the Government originally intended and to behave with greater freedom and independence, a transparent failure regime is needed so that those who are creditors of foundation trusts will know that even if they do not have control of assets or services, they can at least be clear about the basis on which the liabilities to them are to be discharged in the event of the financial failure of the foundation trust.

Andy Burnham: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for rewinding a little, but I should like to return to targets. He correctly quoted my remarks of a couple of years ago, but today let me say to him quite clearly that, where targets are superfluous, I shall look to get rid of them. When I was in my ministerial job and doing the work-shadowing exercise to which I referred, I spoke directly to staff in A and E who said that the four-hour target was a crucial part of making the whole system work—of moving people through the hospital.

When I did that job, I said on record many times that, once met, targets should become standards and points from which the NHS should not retreat. Did I really hear the hon. Gentleman correctly when he said that he would remove the four-hour A and E target? Would that not take us back to the A and E chaos and lack of hospital through-flow that we saw in the past?

Mr. Lansley: The Secretary of State appears not to have remembered some of our exchanges, because I have been very clear about the matter: I would remove a central, top-down, four-hour process target. Commissioners and providers of service in the national health service need to arrive at a contract that makes clear the standards that they will meet. In emergency care and other aspects of care, however, the Government's objective should be to move from targets to outcomes. He might like— *[Interruption.]* I shall explain the issue to the right hon. Gentleman, because, since he became Secretary of State, he will not have had the opportunity to read the latest—further—report by Dr. David Colin-Thomé, the national clinical director for primary care, on what happened at Stafford general hospital. He makes clear both the distinction between targets and outcomes and his belief that the Government's and Department's responsibility should be to focus on those outcomes.

The job from the centre is to specify the outcomes that we are trying to achieve, so, for example, emergency admissions for stroke might indeed embrace 30-day mortality. The quality of subsequent stroke care might include the proportion of patients who go on to live independently, and we can benchmark that against performance in other countries and determine, as we should, the quality of care in this country as compared with other countries. We cannot compare the four-hour target to other countries, however, because they do not define the quality of care that is provided by simply measuring how long people wait in an emergency department.

Processes, including the standards that support outcomes, must be determined between those who purchase services on behalf of patients and those who provide them. That might well include a question about the length of time that patients wait, but it would be negotiated and exist in a culture of continuous improvement. Some places would say "not 98 per cent. but less than 98 per cent." Others would say, "more than 98 per cent." If the Secretary of State talks to people in emergency departments, he will know that they might say, "Actually, we should have quite a different time in emergency departments for those who present with minor conditions as compared with major conditions." In a contract with a hospital, one might quite properly have specified standards that set a much shorter waiting time for children than for adults.

Andy Burnham: They are targets.

Mr. Lansley: No, they are not targets; they are normal things that happen in normal life. Those who are responsible for contracting services have a responsibility with those who provide services to specify in the contract—

Andy Burnham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: In a moment. I am just explaining the issue to the Secretary of State—in response to his previous intervention.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: Listen to teacher.

Mr. Lansley: There is a small benefit in having been in the job for almost six years.

Although the Minister has returned to the Department, having spent a year there previously, I am on my fourth Secretary of State and it is getting quite tiresome to have to explain endlessly to a succession of Secretaries

[Mr. Lansley]

of State that there is a real world out there, where people who want services contract for them in a culture of continuous improvement. The Government should focus on measuring the overall outcome.

Andy Burnham: I do respect the hon. Gentleman's experience in the job, but he did not explain his policy when I was first in the Department and he has not done very well this time. He described a different standard for children and more serious cases, but there already is one in A and E departments. He seems to envisage a world of much more rigid, locally set standards, but the four-hour commitment is simply a cut-through standard—the minimum standard—that helps the whole system to work so that everybody knows where they stand. He is describing just basic, good clinical practice to bring through children and those in more serious need first. If he will forgive me, I do not think that he is putting forward a policy that will deliver clarity; it is a recipe for confusion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. This cannot be a duologue. We want to open the debate up at some stage, and that was rather a long intervention.

Mr. Lansley: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I must confess that I prefer dialogue to monologue, but we are under your direction.

Let me at least make this point just one more time. What the Secretary of State said is simply not true. Patients who present with minor conditions and could be seen and treated are often not; they wait a long time. One Healthcare Commission report on emergency departments noted that that situation bears particularly on the elderly, who often wait almost four hours before they are discharged by the emergency department to avoid a breach. There is a range of such measures, and if, as he says, the proposal is already normal clinical practice, hospitals will have no difficulty building it into the structure of their performance measurement.

The Secretary of State made an interesting point, however, because I remember that Kettering general hospital was one of the original pilots of the four-hour target. The hospital said that the target helped it to deliver change in order to expedite the treatment of patients. I said, "Fine. Do you think therefore that you should go from 95 per cent. to 98 per cent?" The hospital said no. I then asked whether it thought it should go from four hours to three hours. The hospital said no.

Subsequent to my conversation with that hospital, which took place almost six years ago, the Government imposed the shift from 95 to 98 per cent., which the College of Emergency Medicine and many emergency medicine practitioners do not support. The Government did so in the belief that it was the right way to secure continuous improvement, but the right way to do so is to start performance management with the four-hour target and to move to an understanding that a range of quality metrics should be a part of the culture of continuous improvement. If it is not, we end up with 98 per cent. and four hours, and that is it. At Staffordshire general hospital and many others, it has become obvious that the focus on a single target for the delivery of emergency medicine leads to an immense range of distortions, many of which diminish the quality of care provided to patients.

We talked briefly about the exceptions to the private income cap. The Secretary of State should not listen to the siren voices, who have now left the Chamber, on the Government Benches. If one were to abolish the option to provide private medicine alongside NHS medicine, one would cripple hospitals such as the Royal Marsden. If anybody wants to see how being able to offer private health care alongside NHS care is to the benefit of NHS patients, they should go to the Royal Marsden hospital, because, with the Healthcare Commission's ranking of double excellent year after year, it has demonstrated how it can reinvest the benefit of its private work in the NHS patients it looks after. The Opposition will be very critical if Ministers use a review as an excuse not to put into this Bill the opportunity for Ministers to introduce regulations to make exceptions to the private income cap. Ministers will know that Monitor feels that foundation trusts are highly constrained by the 2003 legislation. It can be changed only through this amending legislation; if it is not, the Government's review will take place at some point in the summer or autumn—after the primary legislation opportunity has disappeared.

The Secretary of State talked about innovation, but, frankly, I am not sure whether we can give much credence to the way the Government have gone about innovation. The Darzi review, in an interim report in October 2007, said that there would be an innovation council. It met, but the Department's website says that it last met in April 2008. The council seems to have disappeared since then. The fund that was supposed to be set up with the Wellcome Trust on a 50:50 basis—£50 million each—seems to have just disappeared, too. The provision is in the legislation simply so that the Secretary of State can give money to people who have already done something. However, he already has the power to incentivise people to do things in the future; he does not need legislation to do so.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) will want to talk about pharmacy. The Government pursued dispensing doctors in an abortive attempt to remove some of their dispensing rights, and I worry that the Government are now seeing pharmaceutical needs assessment as a way, through primary care trusts, of arriving at a similar conclusion by a different route. We have to make sure that pharmaceutical needs assessments are real things that deliver real benefits, but the documentation that I have seen supporting such assessments simply says that primary care trusts should go away and work out what requirement there is for pharmacy services in their areas and commission according to that requirement. Where is the scope for patient choice, capacity building or a range of independent sector providers? Where is the freedom for pharmaceutical services to develop in response to need? We do not need primary care trusts to take to themselves more and more power over dispensing in their areas.

I come now to what I think will prove to be the most contentious issue in the Bill: I am thinking of the Government's proposals on the point-of-sale display of tobacco. Time does not permit me to talk about the evidence at length, but I should say that my noble Friend Earl Howe and other Members of the House of

Lords did a sterling job of considering the Bill and amending it in two important respects. They entrenched the constitutional principles of the NHS and put exceptions to the private income cap into the Bill.

My noble Friend set out at length the difficulties with some of the research evidence that is prayed in aid by the Government on point-of-sale tobacco display. In truth, comparisons between Canadian provinces such as Saskatchewan, which went down the route of a display ban, and other Canadian provinces, which have not had a display ban but have taken some of the other measures, show that the latter provinces have made similar progress—sometimes even greater progress.

I hope that we will have a substantial discussion in Committee on the subject. I hope that Government and Conservative Committee members will contrive to take evidence for that purpose, because our approach should be evidence-based and the evidence should be tested in Committee. When the Bill comes back here on Report, I hope that the Government, like us, will give Members a free vote. Hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), the Chairman of the Health Committee, will well recall that, in itself, the giving of a free vote energised the debate about the ban on smoking in public places; in part, it led to the conclusion that we came to, rather than the one that would otherwise have been imposed by Ministers. I hope that, like us, the Labour party will give a free vote on these issues relating to public health and allow the evidence to determine Members' views on the subject.

Although we will have a free vote, I should say that we on the Conservative health team strongly believe, like the Secretary of State, that smoking is still the greatest avoidable cause of premature mortality and that the rate of new smoking among young people is still far too high. We need to do whatever we can—if it is supported by the evidence—to ensure that as few young people as possible smoke. In that respect, we need to do more to combat smuggling and to act on nicotine replacement therapy, although those issues are not the subject of the Bill. We must ensure that the prescription and strength of NRT are optimised for the purposes of smoking cessation services.

Furthermore, we want two measures that could be in the Bill to be looked at. The first is the banning of tobacco vending machines from public areas of licensed premises; at the very least, we should structure the legislation so that we can ensure that young people do not have access to these machines in such areas. Secondly, there is an anomaly between the proxy purchasing of tobacco and the proxy purchasing of other products, alcohol in particular. If adults buy alcohol for children, that is a criminal offence, but the same does not apply to the purchase of tobacco. We see absolutely no grounds for such a perverse anomaly; it is important that adults should not give young people alcohol, but it is probably even more important that they do not give them cigarettes. We will press for the ban on proxy purchasing to extend to tobacco.

The Bill is a collection of measures that are not all bad; some are good. The incorporation of the principles of the NHS into legislation is a step forward, for which we have asked in the past. It has not been done precisely according to the NHS principles expressed in the NHS plan 2000; perhaps the Minister responding will explain why that is. Why has the principle that the NHS supports and values its staff been left out? That is rather curious. None the less, it is important that the principles are there.

The Bill is a missed opportunity to create a real constitution for the NHS. Most of all, however, it is a missed opportunity to entrench the reform process in a way that would show that the Government are committed to a vision of a health care system that is at least as good as that of any other country in the world. The system's outcomes should be benchmarked against the outcomes of other countries' systems, not against a small number of narrow process targets that distort the activity of the NHS.

We should create a framework that delivers reform and incentivises providers of NHS care to deliver a rise in productivity rather than the fall that we have seen in the past decade. We should see the delivery of real patient choice, with the information flows that make that happen. The Secretary of State said that there was a right to information in the constitution; actually, there is only a pledge that the NHS will strive to provide information—nowhere is it said that the information will be that which patients really need for choice to be supported.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that Ministers want to create the kind of information revolution and marketplace for information in health care that would deliver the real empowerment of patients. We want a structure in which decisions are increasingly made at the front line, but the Government are still trying to have it both ways. They talk about devolution in health care, but they are actually entrenching a structure that is all about top-down command and control; it is still all about command and control at the Department of Health. Health Ministers' response to what I was saying about targets illustrated even more the fact that they cannot get their heads around the thought that their job is not to decide precisely what should happen to every patient who arrives at an emergency department.

The issue is about those who are responsible for care. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says from a sedentary position that he remembers what it was like. The change in capacity and the increase in resources are important, but it is to traduce NHS staff to suppose that if the Government did not impose a four-hour or 18-week target, NHS staff would say, "Oh well, patients can wait any amount of time—it doesn't really matter any more." NHS staff care more than any of us about the quality of care that they provide patients. If they have the resources, freedom, opportunity and an incentive structure that helps to make it happen, they will be potentially capable of delivering the best health care in the world.

We know that the NHS is founded on the principle of equity, and we will not compromise on that principle; indeed, we need to do more to deliver it. However, in the past decade, under this Government, the NHS has become less efficient as productivity has fallen. It needs to become more efficient. Most of all, we must have excellence alongside equity. We will not achieve excellence in the NHS unless we focus on the outcomes and compare the health outcomes and health gain in this country with those of the very best health economies anywhere else in the world.

I conclude with a motto: "Nil satis, nisi optimum." As the Secretary of State will know, it is the motto of Everton, his favourite football club. It means "Nothing

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but the best is good enough." That is our motto for the national health service; I hope that, in the Secretary of State's short tenure, it will also be his.

6.19 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Could I first say—*[Interruption.]* I have to tell hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench that I have got quite broad shoulders; I have had them for 26 years in this place, and they will remain.

Let me first say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—I congratulate him on getting his new position on the Front Bench—that I support the Bill. It is quite wide-ranging and pulls a lot of things together, but not targets, which the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) talked about. He mentioned an 18-week wait. Nowadays, everybody talks about patient choice in our national health service. In my local hospital, just five years ago, somebody wanting orthopaedic surgery was offered waits of months, if not years, for procedures on things such as knees and hips—or if they had a few thousand pounds, they could go to an independent hospital in Sheffield and have it done the following week by the same surgeon. Targets have got rid of that type of patient choice, which has been offered, wrongly, for very many years.

The hon. Gentleman says that we should not have such targets and we should let health professionals get on with it. With all due respect, some of them—a minority, I have to say—were getting on with it, and getting away with it, for years by using long waits in order to be able to increase their earnings in the independent sector. This Government have stopped that, not just in South Yorkshire but up and down the land. They should be congratulated by every Member of this House, in the knowledge that many of their constituents are not covered by health insurance. Many of those people discovered that if they wanted to get a better quality of life quicker, they would be asked to go and get bank loans or dip into savings. That situation has gone, and the waiting list target alone has done more than anything else to achieve that. Of course, there has also been increased capacity because of investment.

One of the aspects that I want to focus on is the national health service constitution. I know that that is, and will continue to be, a bit of a rolling programme. Nevertheless, having served on the Health Committee since the last general election, I know that many people up and down the land are frustrated when they see drugs going through the NICE process, whereby they are assessed and it is agreed that people should have them and it is accepted that they would be good clinically and cost-effective, and then those drugs are denied to them by the local purchasers—the primary care trusts. Through the constitution, people will have the right to a drug that has been through the NICE process; that is progress indeed.

NICE was set up many years ago—in my view, to get rid of so-called postcode prescribing. That is an inequitable system, because whether people can have drugs that have gone through the NICE process varies from one constituency, covered by one commissioner, to the next. This will be a major step towards introducing what it was intended that NICE should do—although I know that it does many other things as well.

I look forward to the Public Bill Committee's reaction to this debate, although I should say to my right hon. Friend that I am not volunteering to serve on it; I have other things to do on a Thursday morning with the Health Committee. I look forward to seeing what the constitution is going to mean—not only to patients, although it does have an effect particularly in that respect, but to staff. It also covers rights and responsibilities. Rights are very important in our health care system, but so are responsibilities. What responsibilities do we have as individuals, or do patients have in terms of their health care? What will the NHS ask of them as regards what they have to do to contribute to their own good health, besides what the health service does for their ill health? I look forward to that debate.

My right hon. Friend will have heard me say on many occasions that in the 21st century the issues that will affect health care in this country, in particular, are not those that dominated public health in centuries and decades gone by. It is not about housing now, although we have to accept that there is still some poor housing around. It is certainly not about sanitation or fresh water supplies. I was one of those born into the first generation that could be immunised against many things that used to kill tens of thousands of people in previous generations. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we are immunising young women against cancer—just one type of cancer, I accept. That is an extraordinary step for medical science. The real threat to the health of the public in the 21st century will be about what the individual does or does not do—how much alcohol they drink, what food they eat and in what quantities, and whether they take exercise. Many things done by individuals will impact collectively on the health of the public. I look forward to the NHS constitution starting that important debate very early on in this century. It is the debate for the 21st century, come what may in terms of the health needs of the nation. It is no longer just about treating ill health, which the NHS has been doing very well for the past 60 years.

I am interested in the concept of the innovation prize. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said that money is given to people who have achieved something. As I understand it, the innovation prize is about doing things differently from what happened in the past when money was given to people to carry out research within the NHS. Innovation is vital. It is the reason the NHS has improved, and continues to improve, the health of this nation in many respects, and it should be encouraged. However, we need to examine the idea that if someone makes an application and gets a pot of money to do research, it goes ahead, but if they make an application and do not get the pot of money, it does not go ahead.

I have here the Library research paper on the Bill, which discusses the innovation prize, saying that clause 14

"enables the Secretary of State to award prizes to promote innovation (including research) in the provision of health services in England, including prizes for work done before the Bill currently before Parliament becomes law. It also enables the Secretary of State to establish a committee to advise about awarding such prizes and to pay the committee's members."

My understanding—I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister of State will clarify this when he winds up—is that this is not just about reaffirming what happened in the NHS in years gone by, when getting a grant to do research was the only thing that ever happened. The paper continues:

"Debates in the House of Lords on innovation prizes were short; there was no debate at all on Report. There were no amendments in Grand Committee or on Report but on Third Reading, in response to arguments made in particular by Lord Walton and Lord Patel, the Government successfully introduced an amendment to clarify that innovation prizes would include research."

I understand that that is to make the provisions consistent with the National Health Service Acts and what happened in the past.

If we are to improve the health care system and the NHS, we should recognise that one of the major quests that has been going on for the best part of 60 years is about how to spread best practice. I have always said, sometimes with my tongue in my cheek, that we tend to do that by wanting to reconfigure the NHS. We tend to say, "Well, if it's not working in that shape, let's look at another shape for it. Let's look at another way to approach it." In fact most reconfigurations, certainly in the past few years when I have been on the Health Committee and examined in detail what is happening in the health service, have been intended to spread best practice and get things working better in various parts of the NHS.

Instead of thinking of the prizes as structural changes, we should realise that they are about incentivising people to do things themselves. In the past, somebody would get a grant for research and then do it. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will tell me that the prizes are about using the high levels of skills that we have at all grades—not just among hospital nurses and doctors but in other, related professions—to ensure that innovation is encouraged in a more constructive and flexible way.

Various organisations have produced briefings for this debate and for the debates in the House of Lords, and I should like to read out some of their concerns. All of them represent the health professions at some level, and they ask questions about the innovation prizes. In a briefing for Second Reading in the other place, the British Medical Association stated:

"Doctors are at the forefront of innovation in the NHS and the Government's continued commitment to encourage innovation is welcome. We would seek further clarity from the Government on its intention on possible membership of the committee that the Secretary of State may establish to advise on the form and allocation of innovation prizes."

The NHS Confederation, in its briefing for Second Reading in the other place, stated:

"There is little detail in the bill about how the prizes would operate."

That is absolutely true. It continued:

"We would welcome further clarification to the following questions: What will be the size of innovation prizes? Will prizes be awarded to individuals or organisations? Who will make up the committee and how will they be appointed?"

Those are typical questions in the NHS—"There is another committee. Who is going to be on it? Is this a chance for me? Can we get a representative on it?" It is typical of the structure and culture of the NHS.

The Royal College of Nursing, in a Second Reading briefing for this place, stated:

"Nurses are often at the forefront of innovation to improve the quality of patient care. The RCN welcomes the commitment to establish innovation prizes if these are transparent, fair and genuinely raise the morale of NHS staff. However, the way in which the schemes are implemented locally will be key in terms of assessing the practical impact the prizes will have on the NHS and those that work in it."

I leave those thoughts with my hon. Friend the Minister, because it seems to me that we have an opportunity to bring innovation into the NHS by encouraging health professionals to do things that will get them the prize or whatever it is, including by spreading best practice in their workplace. I hope that the prizes are used sensibly and flexibly, so that we can further improve the NHS.

From what both Front Benchers said earlier, it seems that the part of the Bill that is likely to create debate during its passage is the provisions in part 3 on point-of-sale tobacco advertising and vending machines. I wish to say a few words about smoking and health inequalities. Members may know that in March, the Health Committee published a report on health inequalities. It addressed smoking, which is a major issue in health inequalities in this country and in other parts of the world.

The report showed clearly that the more deprived a person is, the more likely they are to smoke. Smoking is linked to almost every indicator of deprivation, including in income, education and housing tenure. There can be no question about that. Perhaps I ought to be saving part of my speech for another debate, because we have not yet had the opportunity to debate the Government's response to the report. Other countries, particularly in northern Europe, classify deprivation and so on not by social class, as we do, but by education. There is no doubt that in countries not dissimilar to ours, there is more smoking among people whose education level is not high.

In turn, smoking drives health inequalities here in the UK. It accounts for half the gap in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in our society. There is clear evidence that quitting, or even better not starting, greatly reduces that gap. According to recent research by Dr. Laurence Gruer, the least affluent never-smokers have a much better survival rate than the most affluent smokers. Not smoking is a way of partly bridging the gap of health inequalities in this country.

In recent decades there have been great reductions in smoking rates, but they have been greatest among the most affluent. There is a danger that the poorest families could be left behind. I see that two members of the Select Committee are present for the debate, and one thing that we found was that although the health of the population is getting better, with life expectancy getting longer in every social class, the gap between the lower and higher social classes is widening. That is disturbing.

Just as smoking usually starts in childhood, so do the health inequalities that it brings. By protecting young people from tobacco marketing and reducing youth smoking rates, the Bill promises to reduce the health gap in future generations. That should not be considered lightly, because we are not talking about what is going to happen this year, next year or the year after. It is about what will happen in ill health and smoking maybe a generation down the line.

The measures in the Bill are proposed not in isolation but as part of a comprehensive strategy, most of which has gone through the House in recent years. It is especially important to have a proper plan for tobacco control, particularly if we believe that it is important to reduce health inequalities. When New York went smoke-free, it was not in isolation but as part of a five-point plan

[Mr. Kevin Barron]

including taxation, cessation support, public education and evaluation. Smoking among New Yorkers fell by almost 20 per cent. in four years, and the greatest improvements were among disadvantaged and high-prevalence groups.

I wish to progress the health case against point-of-sale display. In its report on health inequalities, the Health Committee supported that aspect of the Bill. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire rightly mentioned tobacco smuggling, but the relevant recommendation in the report stated:

"Smoking remains one of the biggest causes of health inequalities; we welcome both the Government's ban on smoking in public places, and its intention to ban point of sale tobacco advertising, as evidence indicates that both of these measures may have a positive impact on health inequalities."

That is very important, and the last time the House legislated on smoking, when we had the big debate about smoking in public places in 2006, it was the recommendation of the Health Committee that carried the legislation through. I congratulate hon. Members of all parties, including the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) and the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), who supported that recommendation at the time. Considering the matter in detail and having the Select Committee take evidence and make recommendations made a major contribution to turning the proposal into the popular legislation that it is now. Up and down the land, people say that the smoking ban is the best thing that happened—I hear that all the time. It happened because the House examined the evidence, considered the problems in our society and reached the right conclusions.

I may be in a different Lobby from the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire on Report, but the evidence shows that the Select Committee also got it right on this occasion.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I was a proud member of the Health Committee, but when we examined the evidence for the Government's proposals, we rejected the Government's attempts to cherry pick who would be protected by the legislation. We said, based on the evidence, that if we were to protect one, we needed to protect all. Such evidence is lacking for the provisions in the current Bill.

Mr. Barron: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's first point. The first option—allowing smoking in public houses that did not serve food, but not in those that did—was not a public health measure. From a public health point of view, it was not the brightest proposed legislation. The amendment from the Health Committee probably changed minds about the free vote. None the less, the evidence was there.

The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) suggests that there is no evidence to support the proposed ban on displaying tobacco products, but I shall make the case that there is evidence about the effect of such point-of-sale displays. Hon. Members can look through the many representations that we have received on the subject and they will see that the great majority that suggest that there is no evidence that the provisions will be effective come from those who make their living by manufacturing or selling tobacco products. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman can read this tomorrow if that is better, but I want to answer his question. The manufacturers or those who sell tobacco products question the evidence in support of the provisions.

By contrast, those who insist that the evidence is good are, for the most part, health professionals, health charities and researchers. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the letter that we received from Action on Smoking and Health—an organisation with which I have been involved for a long time. Nearly two pages contain the names of organisations that support the Bill, including eight royal colleges, cancer charities and other major charities. However, some people do not support the proposals, and I want to consider people's motives either for supporting part 4 or for not supporting it.

Many hon. Members will have received standard letters from shopkeepers, who are genuinely concerned about the measure. Those letters simply say that there is no evidence that the provisions will be effective. It hardly seems likely that that opinion is based on first-hand reading of the published research. Indeed, we know that the message has been given to shopkeepers by an organisation that calls itself the Tobacco Retailers Alliance, which is funded by the big tobacco manufacturers through the Tobacco Manufacturers Association.

I have battled against the Tobacco Manufacturers Association and tried to influence the House on tobacco legislation since the early 1990s, when I promoted a private Member's Bill. The Tobacco Manufacturers Association paid Members of Parliament to stay overnight on a Thursday to talk the Bill out on a Friday. Indeed, it was talked out. Its purpose was to ban tobacco advertising and promotion. It was eventually introduced in law by the Government, who should be congratulated on that.

The Tobacco Manufacturers Association has tried, through many different organisations, to buy influence in the Chamber for decades. The recent letter that we received from the Tobacco Retailers Alliance has many aspects worthy of note. At the end, it states that

"the Tobacco Retailers Alliance is funded by the TMA."

So let us not forget who says that the provisions will not work.

We were sent four pages of questions in red, with accompanying answers. I shall read out only the first two. The first question and answer is:

"Why are shopkeepers so worried about hiding tobacco out of sight?

Because it may put them out of business. A tobacco display ban would be a huge financial and operational burden on small shops."

The second question and answer is:

"Would shops be forced to close because of this?

Yes—we think so."

Throughout the House's history as a legislator on tobacco, going back to the late 1950s, when the late Sir Richard Doll found the connection between smoking and ill health, the tobacco companies have funded dubious research to oppose anybody who claimed that there was a direct connection between tobacco and ill health. They have got somebody to come along to say that small shops may be put out of business or that smoking "may" harm health. For decades, they have tried to undermine concrete evidence of the link between tobacco and ill health.

We must never forget that the Tobacco Manufacturers Association has influenced individual Members in this country for decades. Its aim is to protect at all costs a substance that leads to 50 per cent. of the people who use it dying a premature death. We should go further in our actions against the promotion of tobacco.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is clearly passionate about the subject. I may disagree with his line of thought, but will he go further and support any Liberal Democrat amendments to prevent the sale on of tobacco products by an 18-year-old to someone younger, as happens with alcohol?

Mr. Barron: I am happy to listen to the case for any amendments to improve people's health and stop the selling of a substance that creates ill health and is addictive. I think that a member of the Conservative Government in the early 1990s said that if tobacco had been discovered and brought to this country today, it would be banned. I think that most people agree. However, it was discovered long ago and has not been banned.

When we examine suggestions of lack of evidence, we must remember where they come from. We do not rely only on the experience of Iceland and Canadian provinces, which show—in the real world—how putting an end to promotional displays reduces youth smoking. We also have a wealth of scientific evidence to show how that works.

Earlier this year, researchers in New Zealand published a systematic review of the evidence. Seven out of eight studies found a significant link between exposure to point-of-sale display and smoking initiation. Another study—this time of adults—found that even pictures of cigarette packs provoked cravings among smokers, and a third of recent ex-smokers reported urges to smoke after seeing tobacco displays.

That is, in miniature, a version of the debates that we had back in the early '90s and late '90s about billboards and posters in this country. Billboards did not even have to have tobacco products on them—all they needed was a bit of purple cloth, and most people with an inquiring mind would know exactly what they were about. The name of the product did not have to be there; people knew what was going on. That is how tobacco—and, for that matter, other products—have been promoted for decades in this country. Indeed, tobacco is still promoted in that form in places that retail it.

An even more recent study, which was published just last month, shows that tobacco promotional displays in the US are concentrated in low-income minority ethnic neighbourhoods. Interviews with shopkeepers reveal that contacts with tobacco companies left shopkeepers with little or no control over such displays. The tobacco companies make the decisions about where displays go, and if shopkeepers do not comply, they are penalised under incentive programmes. A study of tobacco displays in England conducted last summer also found evidence of similarly coercive relationships. That study found half of all displays within one metre of sweets displays, while one in five displays obscured the health warnings. One retailer explained:

"Display is owned by the tobacco company. When move briefs around by a deadline, trader has either star points or money donated...Tobacco company takes photos to prove briefs changed by deadline."

The health and medical communities are united—I read the list of supporters out earlier. The research clearly shows that tobacco displays increase awareness of tobacco brands and prompt purchase among young people, and that jurisdictions that have put an end to such displays have seen youth smoking fall. There can be no question about that. No matter how one wants to dress it up or who pays for the research to do that, the peer-reviewed evidence is there for all to see. However, if the opinion of the leading researchers and health campaigners and the royal colleges were not enough, Channel 4's FactCheck service concludes on its website that

"the evidence points pretty firmly the government's way. And to say, as the opposition parties do, that there's no evidence the ban will have an effect on smoking among young people seems pretty misleading."

I say this to Opposition Members: go on FactCheck's website and have a look at what it has found. The people at FactCheck are not supported by the TMA or the Government; they are people who have done open, individual research with our constituents about what should and should not happen.

Let me say a few words about the economic counter-arguments. Hon. Members will remember the mailbags filled with letters from the hospitality trade, which was genuinely alarmed by the effect that smoke-free legislation would have on its business. The tobacco industry told those businesses that the impact of such legislation would be devastating and they believed that, but it was not true. In the years following the introduction of smoke-free legislation, the number of premises licensed to sell alcohol in England increased by 5 per cent. Hon. Members will remember the claims sent to them about 39 pubs closing every week. However, that evidence, wherever it came from, was hardly independent and it cannot be verified. Such research does not say how many pubs closed before the legislation or how many new premises have opened since. Also, it often attributes changes entirely to the regulations, ignoring the recession, the long-term trends in the pub trade and—this relates to the Health Committee's current inquiry—the pricing and availability of alcohol.

The British Beer and Pub Association sent all hon. Members evidence of where pubs had been closing. However, about three months ago I did a study of the borough of Rotherham—I am one of three hon. Members who represent it. I looked at the previous 12 months—the period for which the British Beer and Pub Association had sent us evidence—and found that there were actually four more pubs than there had been 12 months previously. I therefore find the idea of 39 pubs a day closing because of smoke-free legislation—or, for that matter, anything else—difficult to believe. I know that people in Rotherham like a drink, as I do now and again, but I do not think that the closure of 39 pubs a day is a real measure of what was happening. We must therefore always be careful when people send us briefs about proposed legislation.

Also, when shopkeepers say that the changeover will cost them £5,000 or £2,000, they are again quoting the tobacco industry. On closer examination, we realise that some of those costs include not only the cost of installing CCTV, but the cost of closing the shop to do so. That is hardly a truthful analysis of the cost of the changeover. The real costs would be much lower, with both Action on Smoking and Health and the Department of Health

[Mr. Barron]

having been quoted a cost of around £200 by leading Canadian suppliers, who have some experience of such matters. Small shops will also have until 2013 to comply, whereas larger shops will have until, I think, 2011, so there will be a lot of experience around to help with any costs to the small tobacco retailers we have discussed. Vending machines are also covered in the Bill, although I am a little confused, because we are giving the Government powers to take action in respect of vending machines without knowing what action we would like taken. However, perhaps that is a good thing—that is fine; that is okay.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: That is a cop-out.

Mr. Barron: Hon. Members who are concerned about the future of local tobacco retailers should be particularly supportive of the provisions restricting vending machines. Vending machines compete with local retailers in the convenience tobacco market, taking just over £1 billion a year. That is quite a large sum. Unlike retailers, vending machines do not verify the age of the customer and are consequently a regular source of cigarettes for 17 per cent. of regular teenage smokers. Vending machines are also not popular with regular smokers, typically charging 20 per cent. more for 20 per cent. fewer cigarettes—that is, for packs of 16 cigarettes. One survey showed that only one regular smoker in 20 had used a vending machine once in the previous six months.

The other thing is that vending machines are found, by and large, in alcohol outlets—that is, in pubs. Relapse into smoking is strongly associated with alcohol. Situating vending machines in bars could trigger relapse among smokers trying to quit. Many years ago, when I stopped smoking, back in the 1970s, the one problem was going out at the weekend with my friends for a drink in pubs with smoky atmospheres. I am pleased that we have got rid of those atmospheres; I would like us now to remove the temptation to buy what is available over the bar or in more accessible places.

An end to tobacco vending machines would also end sales to children, transfer valuable business to more responsible retailers and support smokers trying to quit. The age check can be done by a retailer, but it cannot be done by a machine. There were some people saying in the media a few weeks ago, "Well, we wouldn't let them put pound coins in it—they'd be able to get tokens for the vending machines," but what a token has to do with the age of whoever puts it in a machine is completely beyond me.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire talked about vending machines being banned from public areas—I assume that he was speaking on behalf of the Opposition Front Bench. When he said that, I was reminded a little of the argument that said, "We should ban smoking in public houses that serve food, but don't ban it in public houses that don't serve food," but what happens if someone comes along with a sandwich or whatever? My view is that we should look seriously at banning vending machines full stop, so that there is no way that young people can access them. If we really want to help small retailers, that would be one way of doing so. I know that this proposal is not in the Bill, but I would be more than surprised if an amendment were not tabled on Report to ban vending machines altogether. There is no way that those machines can check anybody's identification, whether they are in public places or elsewhere.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman include in his comments nightclubs where there is a strict over-18s policy? Are not there some environments in which such machines could be placed? Does he think that there should be a blanket ban, or are there areas in which the machines could be properly policed?

Mr. Barron: That is a very good point. If there were a minimum age for admission to an establishment, that could be sufficient to prevent the under-age purchase of tobacco in those places.

We all know, however, that no one is asked their age before they use a cigarette vending machine. There is no ID check for anyone with a few pound coins who has access to a vending machine. On that basis, we ought seriously to look at their use. On the hon. Gentleman's point, I will ask the powers that be in the Department whether an amendment could be made so that a ban did not cover all areas, but my instinct is that we will never be able to cover these machines with any form of licensing. Instead, we ought to consider banning them from public places.

I have asked the Minister a number of questions about how he sees the innovation prizes developing, and how much money would be involved. Perhaps he will tell us how they are going to encourage people in the national health service further to develop their skills to provide better services to our patients. I hope that the intentions behind the Bill will have the support of the House, although I think one or two matters will be contentious.

I would say to all Members that, if anyone sends them a briefing on any subject, telling them that something is right or not right, they should go to the source material to find out who is peddling these myths. We are all susceptible to getting a nice easy briefing from time to time and simply standing up and reading it out, but life is not like that, certainly when it comes to tobacco. Good evidence over many decades suggests that we need to treat with deep suspicion any briefings that support tobacco in one form or another.

7.2 pm

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): It is a shame that the Secretary of State has had to leave the debate, although he apologised for doing so. I should like to put on record my congratulations to him on his appointment. When I first met him, we were on the Health Select Committee together. I originally thought that he was just new Labour voting fodder, but I soon realised that he was more than capable of making up his own mind on the issues. He is independently minded, and the only Minister I have ever been able to persuade to change a clause in a Bill. He does think things through.

The broad thrust of the Bill is welcome. We have heard the outline of what it includes: the NHS constitution; quality accounts; direct payments; and a range of measures following the next stage review. However, if the interventions during the Secretary of State's speech are anything to go by, the measures that will attract the most attention are those that deal with tobacco. I see that Labour

Members are now dribbling back into the Chamber, so I assume that their meeting has finished and they can now concentrate on the real issues.

Many areas of the Bill deserve our consideration, and I will start with tobacco. I want to put on record my personal baggage in this regard. My father died of lung cancer. He had never smoked in his life, but he was surrounded by smokers. He was also a newsagent. In thinking through these issues, I have looked carefully at all sides of the argument, but when it comes to a clampdown on smoking, I sometimes have to restrain myself from being a fag fascist—although I am as nothing compared with the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron).

I welcome some of the Government's actions so far, although I query whether enough has been done. The increase in smoking-cessation programmes is welcome, although the quality and outcomes framework needs to be tightened up. It should not be enough for GPs simply to mention the need to stop smoking; there should be real evidence that that has happened. I am not entirely convinced that it is a measure of success that someone has quit smoking for four or six weeks, as is the case in some parts of the country. However, I congratulate the Government on eventually getting round to banning smoking in public places.

The Bill also contains a hotch-potch of further proposals. Our big regret is the complete absence of a comprehensive tobacco strategy. If the Government were to produce such a strategy, we might be able to get an indication of their thinking. Instead, we are faced with a fairly random set of initiatives. The big idea is the prohibition of the display of tobacco products at the point of sale. It is not being sold as something that will reduce sales in general, however. It is seemingly to be being touted as a measure to reduce sales to children, but the evidence that it would have that effect is weak. If there were strong evidence that that could be achieved, we would be tempted to support these moves. The Government seem to demand an evidence base for everything else that they do, but the evidence base for that proposal is very weak.

There is evidence that children are influenced by advertising and encouraged to smoke, which provided the motivation for the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002. Many of us have seen pictures of displays of tobacco products in newsagents and supermarkets that push the boundaries of the Act. I was on the Bill Committee that looked into the fine detail of that legislation, and I should not have underestimated the creativity of the tobacco manufacturers. They have come up with a lot of display material that makes their products stand out to people going into a shop. We should do more to amend that legislation and to tighten up the law on what can be displayed, rather than going for the measures in the Bill. That would be honest and within the spirit of legislation that is widely supported on both sides of the House.

David Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, particularly as I have only just returned to the Chamber. She cites a lack of evidence in relation to point-of-sale displays and prevalent traits of smoking in young people, but studies of groups of as many as 25,000 people have shown that the 15-year-olds who are most exposed to point-of-sale displays are three times as likely to smoke as the rest of that age group, and that the effect of such exposure is even stronger than that of parental smoking in the family.

Sandra Gidley: If the hon. Gentleman listens to the rest of my speech, perhaps he will rethink his argument. I do not think that the studies he cites are quite that large.

The bottom line is that, whatever we think about smoking, tobacco is a legal product that can be bought by consenting adults, yet we are planning to restrict its display even more than we restrict that of pornographic material. That seems to be a rather strange attitude to take. A compromise approach that would be worthy of consideration would involve the introduction of plain packaging, and we shall certainly table amendments on that in Committee.

If the aim of the proposed changes is really to reduce under-age smoking, the Bill is making the wrong proposals and missing a few tricks. For example, there should be greater penalties for shopkeepers who sell tobacco to under-age people, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) suggested. It should also be an offence to buy cigarettes and pass them on to someone under the age of 18. It seems odd that the Government are proposing only one measure, when a whole basket of measures such as these would have a much greater effect. I do not understand the Government's objection to such measures; it would be helpful if the Minister explained it in summing up.

The proposals on vending machines are weak. The Secretary of State said that if they did not work, the Government would consider a total ban. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) mentioned places with a strict age restriction, and there may be a case for an exemption, but if we are serious about trying to stop under-age smokers gaining access to cigarettes, we should consider a ban on vending machines and restrict the sale of cigarettes in pubs to behind the bar.

The British Heart Foundation estimated that machines were the source of cigarettes for approximately 46,000 children in England and Wales, so if the Government were really committed to doing something about it, they would go a step further. Children are very clever in getting hold of tokens and other means of accessing the products. Other age-limited products can be bought only through a face-to-face, over-the-counter type of transaction, so why can we not have the same for tobacco products? I hope that the Government will consider the issue further. Many children obtain cigarettes from black-market sources, car boot sales and the like, so it is disappointing that the Government are not using the Bill to address smuggling, which would start to tackle some of the supply problems at source.

The concept of an NHS constitution has received widespread support from the British Medical Association and patient groups, and there even seems to be some agreement between the two main political parties. I agree with the comments of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire about whether the proposal really amounts to a constitution or whether much of it is new, but having all the rights and entitlements written down in one easily accessible format is helpful. The problem is how to prevent yet another motherhood and apple pie

[Sandra Gidley]

exercise and how to make the constitution meaningful so that it effectively becomes a bible of good practice for health professionals while commanding the trust and respect of patients.

It is important that we try in Committee to put some more meat on the bones. For example, it would be helpful to have further clarification of the duty to

"have regard to the NHS Constitution"

and of how it might be challenged. To give a simple example, a person has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. We all know that there is a widespread problem with mixed-sex wards; they were supposed to have been abolished years ago, but that has still not happened. Older people, who are often from a private generation, object to being in a mixed-sex ward and are much more against such wards than younger people. If treated in a mixed-sex ward, the patient could understandably become upset, but could the trust then say, "Well, we had regard to the NHS constitution and the rights in it, but the physical constraints gave us no other option"? It is not clear whether the constitution will act as a driver for change and improvement in that area. If it does so, that will be a very good thing, but it is not yet clear how much in the way of teeth the constitution will provide.

Greg Mulholland: Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we are all committed to narrowing the artificial gap between social care and the NHS and we have created a NHS constitution, we now surely need a social care constitution alongside it? Otherwise, social care will be the poor relation once again. That is particularly important in view of the needs of elderly people.

Sandra Gidley: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. In many cases, the dividing line between health and social care is very hard to identify, so some thought needs to be given to circumstances where the balance between health and social care is a very fine one and it is difficult to unpick which is which. It would be helpful to know whether the Government plan to extend the constitution in that direction, given that, as my hon. Friend says, the current mantra from most political parties seems to be that greater joining up of health and social care services would be good.

I want to move on to discuss discrimination and to raise a concern about whether some matters might fall between two political stools. The constitution states that people have

"the right not to be unlawfully discriminated against in the provision of NHS services"

on a number of grounds. Age is a particularly controversial criterion, but it is clear that the Government are also using the Equality Bill to try to provide some clarity. However, I am not clear about how the Equality Bill and the Health Bill will join up in practice or whether there is any capacity for some issues to be dealt with less than fully by either Bill. When the Minister responds, will he describe what conversations are going on between the various Bill teams working on aspects of the NHS constitution and equality issues to ensure that that cannot happen?

To provide one small example of the sort of problem I mean, the constitution also provides the same

"right not to be unlawfully discriminated against in the provision of NHS services"

on the grounds of disability. Research by the Royal National Institute of Blind People shows that many visually impaired people do not receive information in a form that they can read. Depending on which part of the NHS they want to access, anything from 69 per cent. to 81 per cent. of those people cannot read it. The RNIB tells me that a variety of Ministers have said that the Equality Bill provides the best opportunity to deal with the problem of making the information accessible, but a recent letter from the Solicitor-General stated:

"We are not persuaded of the case for making specific reference to the provision of information in alternative formats on the face of the legislation".

It would thus be helpful to have some idea of how that issue will be dealt with and which legislation will enable people with visual impairments to access the relevant information.

I was intending to go on to deal with issues surrounding health and social care, but we have already covered that, so I will make one final point on the constitution. There were welcome moves in the other place to improve the reviewing of the constitution, but the patient voice seems to be lacking in the review process. There seems to be some resistance to the idea of involving patients and the public on the grounds that that might make the process too long-winded. That seems somewhat ironic, given that page 52 of the good old handbook on the NHS constitution gives patients the right to be involved in the planning of health care services. On one hand, we are giving people a right in a constitution, but on the other we are not giving anybody a right to be involved in its review, which seems to be a major omission.

We very much support the idea of direct payments for health care and we very much support the idea of pilot schemes, too. I have often been against pilot schemes in the past, because they seem to have been used as a mechanism for delaying the implementation of policies that have a good evidence base. In this case, the pitfalls are real, so it seems right to pilot the schemes. I welcome the commitment properly to scrutinise the pilot schemes before going a step further.

Direct payments are aimed at long-term medical conditions and I believe the pilots are going to start later this year. There is also great potential for such payment schemes in maternity care and mental health, so I hope we can pilot those areas, too. Women often have quite specific ideas about what maternity care they want for the birth, and it would help them if they were free to shop around a little more.

There are number of fundamental questions, however. The Secretary of State said earlier that the plan had to be signed off by the care manager. That struck me as potentially problematic. What if there is a disagreement? Many social care direct payments have given the recipients complete autonomy over the way in which the money is spent and the way in which they lead their lives. It seems to me that there ought to be approval of some kind. It could reasonably be argued that care managers should sign off the payments, because we would then know that approved treatments were being given, but that too would reduce patient choice.

I am not sure what benefit would be conferred by direct payments. What is the difference between deciding what people should do and giving them the money to do it, and deciding how patients are to be treated and

making all the payments for them? I do not see much difference in either outcome or process or increase in flexibility. A legitimate question to be asked is "What will happen if patients underspend?" Will they be able to keep the money? I suspect that that is very unlikely. We should also ask what will happen if patients run out of money. The measure is intended to apply to long-term conditions, which are usually fairly stable. However, people may deteriorate. Another condition—a co-morbidity—may render the treatment of a patient much more complex. Will someone suffering from two or three long-term illnesses have to undergo three different assessments and add up the payments, or will that person be treated as a single patient? A number of answers will have to be teased out in Committee.

How will it be possible to calculate the amount that patients will need in order to receive the care that they want? We have all seen comparisons between the amounts spent by PCTs in different health areas, and we know that there are great differences. Will there eventually be a national tariff? Will there be some smoothing mechanism to ensure that people in PCTs that do not fund some services very well are not disadvantaged? The answers to those important questions may not be provided by the pilot schemes if they are conducted on a strategic health authority basis.

The Secretary of State said that if a patient chose a treatment that was not regarded as clinically effective, it would probably not be signed off. However, an equality issue arises as well. Is this a bit middle-class? Research shows that some demographic groups benefit from direct payments much more than others. Can the Minister assure me at this stage that equality will be a consideration in the evaluation, so that we can be sure that we are not hitting only certain sections of society?

All providers will be required to produce and publish quality accounts. I fear that the process will be time-consuming, and that the ultimate benefit will be limited. It reminds me of the time when standard assessment tests were introduced. My children were quite young then. I remember the headmaster saying "These are standard assessment tasks. There is no way they are tests, and there is no way they will ever be used to compare children or to compare schools." When we consider what has happened to SATs, we have to worry about the way in which the quality account data will be used and analysed and the comparative purposes to which they could ultimately be put.

I did not intend to say much about pharmaceutical services, but I want to reassure the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. I am not sure whether he was involved in health at the time—he may have been involved in education—but at one stage the Office of Fair Trading proposed that pharmacies should be subject to a complete change in the control of entry regulations. There was a move to allow them to open anywhere, to allow a free-for-all and to see what happened after that. We ended up with a bit of a fudge, but a fair number of people argued at the time that pharmacies were not like sweet shops or toy shops, and that their provision should be planned as part of the primary health care service. The proposal was considered by the Select Committee, of which the Secretary of State was a member, and he seemed to be persuaded by the argument that control of entry could be used to ensure the provision of better services.

I must declare an interest as a fellow of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, but I believe that if we are to advance the pharmacy agenda and ensure that the public are offered a greater range of pharmaceutical services, needs assessments are essential. That is not about preventing dispensing doctors from doing anything; it is more about giving the public more access to, for instance, smoking-cessation services. I hope that, in the long term, it will mean that when an application is made to open a new pharmacy, the primary care trust will have some control over what happens and will be able to insist that some extra services are provided. I hope that it will mean that we can move away from the supply side, and that people can expect a greater range of services from their pharmacies. I hope that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire will eventually see the proposal in a more positive light, because that is how I think it is intended.

Mr. Lansley: My memory does not serve me well enough to recall how I was involved, but I think that the discussion of the impact of the control of entry regulations took place during our debates on the Bill that became the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003. If the hon. Lady consults the record, she will find that I questioned the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), on the subject. I said that while I did not oppose the liberalisation of control of entry, it must take place alongside proper measures providing for the Department to pay if it wished to have access to community pharmacy. If it was not willing to pay, there would have to be some compensating mechanism through control of entry.

The problem is that in the circumstances that the hon. Lady is describing, someone might wish to set up additional pharmacy premises to offer an additional service to the public. Why are we trying to prevent that from happening? The issue is not a pharmaceutical needs assessment preventing people from providing additional dispensing or pharmacy services; it is how to procure those services in places where there is a lack of community pharmacy. It is in that regard that the contract has not really done the job yet.

Sandra Gidley: I think I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments, although they seem to be slightly at odds with what he said earlier. I am certainly grateful for his clarification of the way in which he sees the whole picture. His initial throw-away comment was that the pharmaceutical needs assessment seemed to be a backhand way of getting at dispensing doctors. That seemed to be his prime concern. It is a shame that he did not take the opportunity to say something a bit more positive then, but he has done so now, and I thank him for his intervention.

We shall have a greater opportunity to debate many of these matters in Committee. There are concerns about innovation, but they have already been mentioned. We shall probably want to return to the subject of asylum seekers. I appreciate the concessions made in the House of Lords, but I do not think that we have yet arrived at an optimum solution.

There is much to be recommended in the Bill, and also much to be improved. The Liberal Democrats do not plan to vote against it, and we look forward to working with all parties to try to improve it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that we are going to have to pick up the pace a little if all seven Members still wishing to take part in the debate are to have the time so to do.

7.30 pm

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Before moving on to the main points I wish to make, I would like to talk about two issues that have taken up a lot of time in our debate. The first is the ban on in-store display material for cigarettes. Before I became a Member of Parliament, I worked in marketing and advertising for 17 years—indeed, at one point I worked with a cigarette brand—and I urge the Government to consider very carefully whether the proposals they are making today will have the outcomes they desire. I wholeheartedly agree that we need to manage very carefully the way in which cigarettes are marketed and sold to anybody, and particularly young people, but the Government are confusing the two issues of access to cigarettes and the attractiveness of cigarettes.

Simply stopping access to cigarettes, as the measure seeks, by hiding them under the counter in shops does not tackle the key issue, which is that youngsters find the idea of smoking cigarettes attractive; it is seen as part of their social life and as making them cool members of their community. Supermarkets have not been successful in marketing own-label cigarettes because they do not have the required brand cachet. Simply hiding cigarettes under the counter does not solve the problem that the Minister is trying to address, which is to stop so many young people in our community smoking. I wholeheartedly support him in that objective, but I am not sure he is using the right tools to achieve it, and I think he needs to do far more work with cigarette manufacturers to understand properly the key motivations and drivers that make people smoke. I do not think that can be achieved simply by getting rid of display material.

The second issue is to do with a point the Secretary of State made about the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence and the availability of recommended treatments. I am sure I do not need to remind the Minister that the Government have already intervened to change what NICE has said should be the desired amount of access to in vitro fertilisation treatment. NICE has firmly said women between the ages of 23 and 39 should have access to three cycles of IVF treatment. That is certainly not available in my constituency, my primary care trust area or my strategic health authority area. It is unavailable not because of any lack of desire to make this very important service accessible to my constituents, but because of a lack of money and funding. We need to prioritise funding. The Government have said today that it will be mandatory for all PCTs to make all NICE guidelines available to all our constituents, but the Government also need to address how that will be paid for, because it is unclear to me how they will square that circle in my area, and other Members may have the same problem.

The three main points I wish to make today are to do with three omissions from the Bill. One of them has already been touched on and Members in the other place have tried to rectify the problem, but the other two have not yet been covered. The Bill is wide-ranging, so it is surprising that it does not address any of them.

The Secretary of State brushed aside the deliberations of Members in the other place when he said he was not minded to allow the new clause 34 that they had inserted into the Bill to remain. The measure allows for exemptions to private patient caps for NHS foundation trusts to be made in regulations. That is particularly important in my constituency. Basingstoke and North Hampshire NHS Foundation Trust, which serves my constituents but is located in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), provides excellent care, particularly in cancer treatment. It has an international reputation, which is extraordinary for what is a district hospital. It has that reputation because of the quality and calibre of its surgeons and cancer specialists and the ground-breaking work they do in rare abdominal cancer, liver cancer and colon cancer.

The hospital has the capacity to treat far more patients than it does at present, but because of the restrictions in place it is prohibited from doing so. It is therefore prohibited from expanding its work in a way that would benefit the people suffering from these chronic diseases—I am sure many Members' will have constituents and family members who have suffered from some of them. Such development could boost the income of what is a very successful hospital. That income would be used to improve its ability to serve our local community and to improve the local NHS services that are already in place. I felt that the amendment in the other place gave the Government the opportunity to introduce regulations that would help my hospital and my community to get a better service. I was therefore disappointed that the Secretary of State was so quick to dismiss as merely a quick fix a measure that had been well thought-through and well debated in the other place.

Basingstoke residents already know the importance of having an internationally renowned hospital in our community, and the benefits of that. We have the Pelican cancer research centre and the ARK, a state-of-the-art teaching facility, and all because of the expertise in the community. We should be nurturing that expertise, not limiting it as the Government and some of the Secretary of State's party colleagues, such as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris), seem to suggest. I urge the Government to think again. I do not think they should consult too widely as that may well lead to the idea being kicked into the long grass, as currently happens to so many ideas in this place. Consultation is not necessarily the right way forward. The Government should talk to the hospitals that are being restricted and hampered. I know the management of my local hospital would be more than happy to talk to the Government on this matter.

I shall now move on to the other two measures that I am surprised were not included in the Bill. I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) that the Secretary of State should perhaps take on the role of public health Minister himself. The Government's policy needs to put more emphasis on public health. It is disappointing that the amendment to include more detail in the constitution was not passed in the other place. Among other things, it gave more clarity of the central role public health should take in the NHS. Public health remains a Cinderella service in the NHS. The Minister needs to think very carefully about that, particularly the role of health visitors.

It is interesting that the Government have not taken the opportunity presented by the Bill to start to deliver on their pledge to implement Lord Laming's recommendations after the recent and tragic death of baby P. The recommendations included highlighting the key role health visitors play in child protection and their function as a universal service, seeing all children in their home environment and with the potential to develop strong relationships with families. The Government missed the opportunity to put these recommendations in place and to put them into action.

The Government must live up to their promise to implement Lord Laming's report in full. Many of the ideas contained in the report do not require legislation, but the Government know that taking health visitors off the statute book in 2001 had a significantly deleterious effect on the number of health visitors coming into the profession. There has been a 13 per cent. drop in the number of health visitors since the dedicated health visitor register was closed in 2004 and the Bill could have provided an opportunity for the Government to demonstrate the valuable role that health visitors can play. They could even have considered placing the role of health visitor back on a statutory footing. I know the profession is interested in talking to the Government about that. Unless the Committee picks this issue up in more detail, it will be another missed opportunity in the Bill.

I say that because the move towards using a mix of lower-skilled staff to replace qualified health visitors is not consistent with the Government's undertaking to implement Lord Laming's report in full; it is precisely the highly qualified and highly skilled nature of health visiting that he focused on in his report. The service is stretched to breaking point in too many parts of the country, leaving more than two out of three health visitors saying that they no longer have the resources to respond to the needs of even the most vulnerable children. I urge the Minister to consider in his response how he could weave this idea and, in particular, the implementation in full of recommendation 32 of Lord Laming's report into the Bill, even at this late stage.

The third and final issue that I wish to raise relates to children's trusts. Clause 2 contains a detailed analysis of the duty to have regard to the NHS constitution, yet the group of organisations that are to have such a duty does not include any mention of children's trusts or Sure Start centres. To someone like me, who looks at these issues in some detail, it feels as though the Department of Health has put its head in the sand. The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill establishes children's trusts as statutory bodies that have an important, if not vital, role to play in the commissioning of services, including NHS services, for children in local communities. I find it interesting that the Department of Health does not appear to be talking to its colleagues in the Department for Children, Schools and Families in order to understand how this Bill and the NHS constitution will interact and link with children's trusts, which its DCSF colleagues feel have such a pivotal role to play. Perhaps this is an oversight or something that the new ministerial group has not yet thought about, but I urge it to do so. If it does not, when the Bill is read by the people running our health services in our communities, such as the group of people I met in my constituency on Friday, who are doing all they can to weave together children's services and make a better and more sustainable offer in Basingstoke, those people will be forgiven for thinking that the Department of Health still does not understand the importance of integrated working in the way it structures legislation.

As I said, I noticed that Sure Start children's centres are also not an integral part of the Bill, despite their being a flagship policy of this Government – again the Department of Health does not seem to be getting a grip on that. Ministers are doubtless aware that the national evaluation of Sure Start undertook a study in 2007 on the effectiveness of Sure Start local programmes and demonstrated clearly that health-led Sure Start children's centres are the most effective way of using the significant amount of public money involved. I realise that there are many new faces on the Treasury Bench and perhaps they need a little more time to get to grips with this part of their brief, but I urge them to look carefully at how they can work more effectively with their colleagues in the DCSF, because such working simply is not happening and that is not right for taxpayers' money, for our constituents or for the people who work in the NHS and our children's centres, and those who work in our children's trust boards in future.

7.43 pm

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Underpinning this debate is the principle that smoking is an addiction of childhood—it is not an adult choice. Today, 1,000 under-16s will have started to smoke for the first time by trying a cigarette, and 80 per cent. of smokers start to smoke before they are 19. The tobacco industry needs to recruit more than 100,000 new smokers each year to replace those who die or who cease smoking. Smoking plays a huge role in perpetuating health inequalities and accounts for half the difference in life expectancy between social classes 1 and 5.

The Bill introduces two important measures that will protect children from smoking and help smokers who are trying to quit. It includes measures to restrict or prohibit cigarette vending machines and to put an end to the tobacco industry's power wall promotional displays. Regrettably, it does not include a third measure: the requirement to sell tobacco products in plain packaging. Those measures are proposed not in isolation but as part of a comprehensive strategy; it is a proper plan to reduce the terrible burden of tobacco-related death and disease.

Campaigners on both sides of the argument have long been vocal, as we have heard in today's debate. In one corner are those who would promote public health and in the other are those who would protect private profit. These are not equivalents. If the measures in the Bill would not work, health professionals would have nothing to gain from promoting them, but it is precisely because they will work that the tobacco industry is fighting so hard to defeat them.

I have mentioned vending machines, and the case against them is unanswerable; I was pleased to hear that Her Majesty's Opposition will be pressing for the measures in the Bill to be toughened. Hon. Members who are still to speak, including the Minister, will doubtless make more detailed arguments, but, in short, mine is as follows: tobacco vending machines provide young smokers with about one in six, or 17 per cent., of the cigarettes they consume, whereas the figure for the entire population

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is about 1 per cent.; these young smokers use the machines as a ready supply of cigarettes because there is no real risk of their being asked for proof of age; those who profit by these illegal sales are almost never prosecuted—we must never forget that; and the machines are unpopular with regular smokers and are sited mostly where alcohol is sold and the resolve of smokers who are trying to quit will be at its weakest. I welcomed the Secretary of State in an intervention. I think he will be a superb Secretary of State, because he has the experience, track record and vision to make a success of the job. I urge him to draft, on behalf of the Government, the strongest regulations possible to introduce an immediate and total ban on tobacco vending machines.

I turn to the central feature of point-of-sale displays. Those who make and sell cigarettes hotly contest the evidence that point-of-sale displays increase youth smoking. However, very few smokers start smoking as adults and if we were to succeed in stopping under-age smoking, the industry would be bankrupt in a generation—that is self-evident. The Bill is against the tobacco industry's interests, as we have seen in the furore and the campaign that it has mobilised, yet again, against any tobacco control measures. The more the industry tells the Government that they are off track, the more certain we and they can be that we are bang on target.

Saskatchewan was the first Canadian province to end point-of-sale display. At the time, its youth smoking rates were rising sharply, but when it put an end to tobacco displays those rates began to fall. The tobacco lobby had the ban suspended for a time, during which the youth smoking rate flatlined, but once the regulations were reintroduced the rates began to fall again—to me, that is proof positive that there is a strong link between the two. Overall, a rising trend had been reversed and the subsequent fall, despite the temporary suspension of regulations, was faster than the Canadian average.

Hon. Members listening to this debate should pay close attention if they receive briefings on this matter from the tobacco industry, as I am sure many have done. In the past, the industry sought to undermine the evidence—part of its modus operandi is always to muddy the evidence, challenge the science and breed uncertainty where something significant is going on—by referring to irrelevant adult smoking rates, by quoting an average decrease that starts years before the legislation came into effect and by comparing Saskatchewan not with the average Canadian province but only with those where youth smoking was falling fastest.

I move the discussion on 1,000 or 2,000 miles, to Iceland, which provides further evidence both of the effect of point-of-sale displays and the lengths to which the tobacco lobby will go to disguise it. In a long-term study that included almost all year 10 students in Iceland—those aged 15 to 16—smoking rates were seen to have fallen by a third, from about 20 per cent. two years before the ban to less than 14 per cent. two years later.

Sandra Gidley: That figure is correct, but it is slightly complicated by the changes in taxation of tobacco products over that length of time. Can he elaborate on how that fits into the picture? I find it very difficult to tease out the details. For example, there was an increase in smoking rates after the taxation went down.

David Taylor: The hon. Lady is right to suggest that many factors influence smoking prevalence. Trying to control those factors, including for levels of taxation, and to identify and isolate what is happening at point of sale is difficult. The Tobacco Retailers Alliance certainly found doing that inconvenient and instead chose to use a small sub-sample of what was in essence a survey of adults. It continued to misrepresent the evidence until the Public Health Institute of Iceland, which was responsible for both studies, told it to stop doing so. I am pleased that the institute was moved to do that.

The health and medical communities are united in saying that tobacco displays increase awareness of tobacco brands and prompt purchase by young people. Jurisdictions that end such displays have seen the prevalence of youth smoking decline, and that is what this part of the Bill is about. If the opinion of leading researchers, health campaigners and royal colleges were not enough, Channel 4's Fact-Check service concludes:

"The evidence points pretty firmly the government's way. And to say, as the opposition parties do"—

by that it probably means opposition in the tobacco industry, rather than Opposition parties—

"that there's no evidence the ban will have an effect on smoking among young people seems pretty misleading."

We also have the economic counter-arguments, and we saw those in profusion when we considered the banning of smoking in workplaces and public places a couple of years ago. Members will remember that one of the main reasons given for opposing the smoke-free legislation was the harm that it was forecast to do to the hospitality trade. The tobacco industry understands that the only business that would really be harmed by smoke-free public places is its own, but it succeeded in alarming publicans who already felt under threat. Members may not be aware that in the year following smoke-free legislation the number of premises licensed to sell alcohol in England went up by 5 per cent.

The tobacco industry knows that it has lost any public sympathy it might once have had, so again it has identified a group of small businesses to manipulate as its front men to campaign on its behalf. The industry has suggested, for example—and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) suggested this earlier—that compliance with the legislation could cost a small shop substantial sums of money, and figures have been quoted of up to £5,000. It has claimed that staff would be injured, thefts would increase and not only would smokers stop buying their cigarettes from small businesses, but they would stop coming into those shops altogether. I understand the alarm of some small shopkeepers, and we have all been to shops where tobacco is the heart of displays behind the counter.

The industry has claimed that in Quebec 12 corner stores closed every week. Like the claim that 40 pubs close every week in the UK, it is difficult independently to verify such statistics. It is never said how many shops closed before the legislation nor how many new premises opened since the legislation was implemented. The industry attributes the change entirely to the regulations, ignoring even the effect the global recession might have. It is almost as though some PR executive hit the "find and replace" button to recycle the old press releases that the industry used last time on smoke-free legislation.

The fundamental flaw in the industry's argument is that it is simply not credible to suggest that there will be no change in smoking rates and, at the same time,

that tobacco sales will fall. In truth, it will be several years before we see a major impact on tobacco sales to adults.

Tobacco packaging has become the industry's most potent advertisement, especially when it comes to encouraging and recruiting young smokers. Traditional advertising is plainly a message from the manufacturer, but with packaging the customer becomes the message carrier. The hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) mentioned the time when she had a tobacco company as a client and how the smoker who carries a particular brand is saying, "This is the brand for people like me." That message is especially powerful to young people eager to fit in.

The Government have committed to fund further research into the effect of plain packs and to include a review of the evidence in the course of their promised tobacco strategy. That is to be welcomed. However, the evidence of how the industry attracts and deceives young smokers is growing and there is no time to waste. For example, manufacturers have long known that so called "mild" variants are as lethal as "full strength". Only last month the appeal court in Washington ruled that some of the biggest tobacco companies in the world were guilty of racketeering and fraud by calling their products "light" or "mild". In the words of the judges, manufacturers

"made the statements with the intent to deceive".

Some people might think that advertising is a systematic attempt to deceive, but this was advertising at its worst.

In the UK, I am pleased to say, the terms "light" and "mild" to describe cigarette brands have been illegal since 2003. Not only that, it has been illegal to give the misleading impression that one tobacco product is less harmful than another. We have stopped the industry using those words, but it continues to send the same misleading message through the use of colour codes: red for full strength, gold for light and even silver for ultra light. Researchers have shown how smokers and young people read these "smoke signals" and fall for the fraud. It is the same low-tar lie—exploiting smokers' health fears but keeping them hooked—only this time it is in code.

Branding is especially important to young people, whether for trainers, tracksuits or tobacco. A brand choice says a lot about how a smoker wants the world to see them. Most start before they are 18 and become brand-loyal, and the industry well understands that. But what if plain packs made smoking more attractive to young people? In fact, studies that gave young people a choice between plain packs and branded packs found they consistently favoured the branded packs. The tobacco industry depends on its ability to recruit 100,000 new smokers a year—300 a day and 12 or 13 in the hour since 7 pm. The industry insists that we cannot know that plain packaging will work until it is tried in the real world, but it opposes any country that dares try it.

The hidden hand of the tobacco industry is at work in all attempts made in democracies to introduce tobacco control and legislation. Those who make their money from the manufacture and sale of tobacco have been very active—as they are entitled to be—in lobbying this House. There may be nothing wrong with that as those who will be affected by regulations have the right to lobby about them, but we have a right to expect that those representations be honest and transparent. Much of what the tobacco lobby has offered us is neither.

Tobacco manufacturers and retailers are experts in tobacco marketing, but when they offer us their opinion on health, psychology and behaviour, we are bound to ask "Are they reliable, independent and expert?", or are their vested interests so great that we must put their evidence aside. The tobacco industry has a long, long history of lobbying Government. Over the past 50 years, it used the same core tactics, in disputing whether smoking causes cancer—a point that was eventually conceded after a very long battle—and in fighting a rearguard action against smoke-free public places. I said to the Secretary of State, when he kindly allowed me to intervene, that the main planks of its campaigns are very similar. They manufacture uncertainty. One tobacco executive has even said:

"Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy."

Members will have heard claims that compliance with the law will cost between £3,000 and £5,000, or that smuggling in Canada increased after point-of-sale regulations were introduced there. The campaigns manufacture uncertainty.

In the face of all the scientific evidence given by all the independent experts and research studies, the industry consistently challenges causation—the link between tobacco smoking and ill health. As much as 50 years ago, the industry was advised by its public relations experts always to dispute the signs. Its line was that cause and effect relationships have not been established in any way, that statistical data do not provide the answers and that much more research is needed. That is always the case. We can always procrastinate by saying that more research is needed—that we need to do pilot studies on this, and that we need to trial that. However, every year we hear that many tens of thousands of people die prematurely because of smoking. They cannot stand aside and wait for pilot research and yet more roll-out studies.

The third of the four tactics that the industry tries to use is to hide behind third-party advocates, which it does very successfully. We will all have received postcards from the "Save our Shop" campaign. Who funds that? An organisation called Responsible Retailers. Who funds that? The Tobacco Retailers Alliance. Who underpins that? The Tobacco Manufacturers Association. There is no surprise in any of those relationships. The Tobacco Manufacturers Association, as my neighbour the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) would confirm, is a club made up of Imperial Tobacco, British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco.

Having followed the current Chair of the Select Committee on Health as chair of the all-party group on smoking and health, I have received a good number of letters from the British Brands Group, which has a keen interest in tobacco policy but seems very shy about disclosing the involvement of BAT. Other Members might have heard Dave Bryans, the president of the Canadian Convenience Stores Association, who is often cited by the tobacco lobby, when he spoke at a meeting here in the spring. I doubt, however, whether he cited or they heard him mention that he was a former executive at Canada's biggest tobacco manufacturer.

Finally, the fourth element of the strategy that the tobacco manufacturers and tobacco industry have rolled out every time that progress has been made on tobacco

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control legislation is, if all else fails, to seek to delay the inevitable. There are measures, among them plain packaging, which the tobacco industry considers inevitable. However, the longer those reforms can be prevented, the greater the industry's profits will be. I said to the Secretary of State that Philip Morris had described that as throwing sand in the gears of regulatory reform.

When Members consider the evidence, they will need to be more than usually careful about the origin of that evidence. When they see the strong case for putting a stop to promotional displays and under-age sales from vending machines and in favour of plain packaging—as well as the case for the benefits to be gained from driving down yet further the rate of smoking among young people—they will realise that the social and health benefits will outweigh all the costs, all the angst and all the delays that we regularly endure when we face the tobacco industry over such measures.

8.4 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), who is chairman of the all-party group on smoking and health, in which I am a humble spear carrier. Where he leads, I follow. I want to return in a moment to the points that he made about tobacco.

May I pick up on a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller) made about clause 34, which caps the private income that can be generated by a foundation trust? When the Bill setting up foundation trusts was going through the House of Commons, I remember objecting to that provision because it would freeze the activity of a hospital such as Basingstoke hospital at what had been its historic level. The whole thrust of the foundation hospital movement was to enable a hospital to develop its specialties, to expand in the areas in which it had a competitive advantage and to generate more income that it could then plough back into increasing its NHS activity. That is exactly what has happened in Basingstoke and I endorse the eloquent plea from my hon. Friend and neighbour that the clause should be allowed to stay in the Bill and should not be axed.

I welcome the Secretary of State to his new post. He could not have known five days ago that he was going to be moving the Second Reading of the Health Bill today and he did so with remarkable skill.

I want to touch briefly on two points, the first of which is chapter 3 and the provision for direct payments. I believe that the most radical element of this Bill is the provision for direct payments, and it has been touched on briefly in the debate by my other neighbour, the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley). It is the manifestation within the NHS of a social policy that has already made good progress in adult services where it trades under the name of personal directed support. Direct payment potentially represents a very radical move from an inflexible, institutionalised response to a client's or patient's needs to a much more flexible, user-friendly response, and I welcome it. When we had a debate about this policy in the social care context, the Minister said that it would mean that people would have a life, rather than a set of services. Indeed, the Minister who said that might well have been the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope), who is sitting on the Front Bench. In the social care context, that summed it up rather well.

I understand that the proposal is only for a pilot and that only a limited range of services can be funded by direct payments, but there are potentially enormous implications for the NHS. When services have been provided by a monopoly supplier, a new market for different suppliers is opened up. At the moment, the NHS is the funder, the prescriber or advocate, and the supplier. As direct payments come into play, the NHS will remain the funder, but the role of advocate and supplier will become available to others. For that to work in the social care context, independent advocacy services need to be available. As I looked through chapter 3, it was not absolutely clear to me who would provide that role for the NHS. If the NHS is the advocate, it is not clear that the patient will get the best value from direct payments because the patients might not be told what is available outside the NHS. If someone else is to do the advocacy, as they probably should, who will do it and who will pay for it? Will the cost of the advocacy have to come out of the direct payment?

I accept the point that choice is less of an issue in health than it is in social services, because it is by its very nature a more prescriptive service, but I think that patients want choice. Although they want choice, they do not want the hassle of contracts, of employing people, of insurance and all the rest. One reason why so few people took up direct payments in social services—initially, only 5.4 per cent. of those who were eligible did so—was the paperwork. We have to make it absolutely clear that the advocate or the NHS can handle the paperwork once the patient has decided on the package. The proposed new section 12A to the National Health Service Act 2006, which appears in chapter 3, makes provision for that, I think.

If direct payments are to work, the supply side of the health care market will have to respond and it might need some pump-priming. There will be demand for a totally different range of services as patients invest in packages of care that they have selected. Over time, the market might change as resources are shifted from institutionalised provision, on the one hand, to much more individualised provision on the other. There might be fewer block contracts, there will need to be much more transparency on costs and, crucially, we will need more trained providers who can provide the packages that people want.

The question of resources has been touched on. The issue of what I call calibration is crucial: how much money should be allocated for the direct payments or the individual budgets? There is a risk that the whole policy will not take off if unrealistic provision is made and people then find that they cannot buy the range of services that they need. At the moment, a PCT can prescribe through the GP or consultant a range of treatment and there is little transparency on cost—it will probably get lost in a block contract. With direct payments, however, the costs are of enormous importance and are very transparent. In some cases, experience with direct payments in social care was that the sum allocated simply was not enough to purchase the care that was needed, which may explain why take-up is low. We need realism in pricing if direct payments are to work.

We need to know how the direct payments policy set out in chapter 3 relates to the parallel policy of allowing primary care trusts to top up individual budgets from social services. For example, when a patient is also a social services client, will the PCT simply put the direct payment into that pot, or will it set up a separate one with its own NHS rules?

Top-ups are allowed in social care. I understand that, because they are means-tested, but apparently they will not be allowed under direct payments for the NHS. I cannot find a provision in the Bill that says top-ups are banned, but the King's Fund briefing says that top-ups will not be allowed. There is a risk of confusion, because we are moving towards toleration of co-payments in the NHS—we had a debate about cancer drugs, for example—and if we are to allow people to top up their social care payments but not their NHS payments, and all the money is put in the same pot, I can see a philosophical problem. I hope the issue of top-up payments will be kept under review.

We have already heard about risk. How do we reconcile the right of an individual to determine how he or she spends the direct payment with the obligation of the PCT to ensure that public money is spent wisely and to discharge its responsibility to look after vulnerable people? We heard from the Secretary of State that there will be some safeguards, in that the PCT will have to validate the plan, but there will inevitably be an element of risk although I do not think it is necessarily a killer argument against going ahead. The same argument was deployed in the social care field, but in the event there has been little abuse of funds.

Finally on this point, I have a philosophical question. Why do the Government stop here? Does the logic of direct payments not imply that they could be extended elsewhere—to adult education or indeed to school-age provision? Perhaps the Minister who winds up the debate will explain the difference between an NHS direct payment and an education voucher. With that controversial question hanging in the air, I shall move to my second and final point, which relates to part 3 and the clauses on tobacco.

My first job as a Minister—30 years ago almost exactly to the day—was to renegotiate the voluntary agreement on advertising with the tobacco manufacturers. Because of my aggressive stance, I was transferred to another Department, but I have long taken an interest in measures that reduce the damage done to the nation's health by smoking, so I welcome the Bill, which makes further progress in the right direction. However, I find myself a little ahead of my Front-Bench colleagues on the issue, and indeed of some of my other colleagues. I hope the Government will resist attempts to water down the Bill's provisions.

The Bill includes two important measures that will help to protect children from smoking and help smokers who are trying to quit. It also includes measures to restrict or prohibit cigarette vending machines and to put an end to the tobacco industry's power wall promotional displays. I agree with all those who say that the measures need to be seen in a broader context—as part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce the incidence of smoking and a proper plan to reduce the terrible burden of tobacco-related death and disease.

The measures in the Bill are wholly consistent with the ban on smoking in public places and the ban on advertising. They are trying to change the climate in which smoking was seen as a socially acceptable behaviour. As advertising was prohibited, so that changed the environment. As smoking in public places was prohibited, that too changed the environment and the measures in the Bill to restrict the display of tobacco packs will make a further change in the environment, to discourage the activity.

Very few smokers start as adults, and if the Government were to succeed in preventing under-age smoking, the tobacco industry would be out of business in a generation. The fact that the industry is so against what is in the Bill sends me the clear message that we must be on the right track and that the Bill must be good for public health.

The health and medical communities are united; the research clearly shows that tobacco displays increase awareness of brands and prompt purchases among young people. Jurisdictions that have put an end to such displays have seen youth smoking fall. A study of smokers published earlier this year shows that displays prompt sales where none has been planned and tempt smokers who are trying to quit. Indeed, one in four smokers say that a display ban would make it easier for them to quit.

I take the point that has been made about the impact on retailers of introducing these measures during a recession, but that is not what the Secretary of State is proposing. Whatever inconvenience small shopkeepers encounter will not occur for four years, by which time we will—we hope—be out of recession. Tobacco displays are typically replaced every three to five years, which would give ample opportunity to plan ahead for low-cost compliance.

The Secretary of State may have noticed that both speeches from the Government Back Benches advocated much faster action on vending machines, as have speeches by Opposition Members. I hope the Secretary of State gets the message that there is an appetite in the House for faster progress than is proposed. The tobacco vending machine market is worth £1 billion and is dominated by Sinclair Collis, a subsidiary of Imperial Tobacco. As has been said by a number of Members, the purchases are unsupervised, young smokers are rarely challenged and in some cases staff even offer assistance. Vending machines compete with small retailers, and a ban on them would help the smaller retailer because sales would be transferred to local retailers who are open all hours. An outright ban on vending machines would provide health gains but, as I have just said, it would also offer a benefit to hard-pressed small shopkeepers.

Smoking is the largest cause of preventable death and disease in the UK, causing more premature deaths than alcohol, obesity, road accidents and illegal drugs combined. The provisions could reduce those burdens on our children, so I hope the House will resist any attempt to water down the provisions and I hope Ministers will be encouraged by the debate so far to build on what is already in the Bill and take the argument and the debate a stage further.

8.17 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North-West

[Dr. Howard Stoate]

Hampshire (Sir George Young), who talks with great authority about smoking and comes up with extremely important points. As he rightly noted, he is well ahead of his Front-Bench colleagues on the issue, and all power to him. I am sure he will support the measures, as he has promised to do.

One of the advantages of a health Bill from my point of view is that it gives me the opportunity to rehearse a well-worn mantra the House has heard many times—"As a practising GP". I do not say that lightly, because it is a serious point. I am proud to be an NHS general practitioner. I am very proud indeed to be on the front line, implementing some of the policies that I have helped my Government to pass over the past 10 years or more. That is an important point because it genuinely informs my work in the House—on the Health Committee, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) chairs so admirably; as chair of many all-party Back-Bench groups that do a lot of work behind the scenes; and in debates in the Chamber.

Ultimately, the proof of any Bill is in its implementation. Our debate and rhetoric in the House do not matter; what matters is how a Bill, when it becomes an Act, affects the lives of people out there. When a health Bill has been through all its stages in this and the other place and has become law and is implemented, I am in a position to judge at first hand how it affects the running of the health service and its direct impact on the health of my patients.

As we have heard, the Bill sets up an NHS constitution—an idea I thoroughly support—which will make a big improvement in the way patients engage with the NHS. I hope it will improve the way they use the NHS so that they get much more from the service, which of course they pay for.

Another aspect of the Bill is that it implements the parts of the NHS next stage review, so admirably run by Lord Darzi in the other place, that require primary legislation. They include provisions on the constitution, quality accounts and direct payments, as we have heard this evening. Despite great progress, the NHS still faces many pressures when it comes to achieving the goals set out in the NHS next stage review. We are a long way away from where we would like to be on the issue; we still have a considerable distance to travel. The next stage review makes it clear that to move forward, the NHS needs to spend time looking at how it can provide a more integrated service for its patients. For example, the review mentions piloting new "integrated care" organisations that bring together health and social care professionals from a wide range of organisations—community services, hospitals, local authorities and others—depending on local needs.

The review also said that stronger support will be given to practice-based commissioning by providing incentives for a wider range of clinicians to get involved. That is an important point. That would enable GPs to work alongside other community clinicians and specialists working in hospitals to develop more integrated care for patients. I strongly support that drive towards more collaboration between health care professionals. I have always believed in the effectiveness of the NHS, but it has been severely hampered over the years by the chronic inability or refusal of primary and secondary care professionals to work genuinely in partnership.

In the past, GPs and hospital specialists rarely engaged with each other in any meaningful way, while the relationship between GPs and community pharmacists was virtually non-existent in most parts of the country. Importantly, the new constitution emphasises the fact that the modern NHS is an integrated organisation that requires all its constituent parts to work in concert for the good of its patients, and that is long overdue. Although progress is being made in that area, it is clear that in parts of the NHS we still have a long way to go if we are to get the level of integration that we need.

One of the main challenges is information technology, and that, in the main, is what I want to talk about tonight. Connecting for Health, which started its life as the national programme for IT, has been mired in controversy since its very inception. Problems with software packages, and to do with access and security standards, together with the woeful failure of its commissioners to appreciate the complexity and scale of the undertaking, have caused severe delays in the roll-out of the NHS care records service, which, of course, is the centrepiece of the entire programme. Until we resolve that issue, we will never achieve the degree of integration that the next stage review envisages.

As someone who does some general practice, I have encountered my fair share of IT problems over the years. The much-vaunted choose-and-book system, which is designed to link 30,000 GPs with almost 300 hospitals across the country, is a case in point. When it works, it is wonderful. It allows me to search the entire NHS database for clinics that provide the service that my patients require. It allows the patient to sit with me and choose which of those clinics they wish to be referred to. They can trade off factors such as parking convenience, the knowledge of a particular consultant, particular specialties within a department, and the ability to visit a hospital near where their family lives. All those wonderful things, which in the past were virtually impossible, are now possible with choose and book. A patient could say, "I'd much rather be seen in Birmingham, doc, because my sister lives there"—not a problem. As long as the option comes up on the choose-and-book website and meets the tariff requirements, I can book an appointment in Birmingham for them. When the system works, it works marvellously well.

David Taylor: I spent 30-odd years, from the age of 19, working in the IT industry in the public sector before coming to this place in 1997. One of the problems in the public sector is that the outsourcing mania that there has been, particularly in the civil service, over a very long period has deprived and denuded Government structures of people who can act as intelligent clients. In other words, the Government are more susceptible to the wiles, charm and public relations of snake-oil salesmen, who are fairly common in the software industry. That is the problem. Intelligent clients can spot where the problems are, and the problems that my hon. Friend mentions were not spotted in the early days of Connecting for Health.

Dr. Stoate: I bow to my hon. Friend's great judgment on the issue. He is a real expert on IT, particularly in the public sector, and I defer to him. I sometimes wish

that there was some more snake oil poured into my computer; it might then work a bit faster. As things are, it cranks along.

Things are not always straightforward, and I shall give some examples. Only about half of all services in my area are available on choose and book, and not all of the services that are supposed to be bookable can be booked. A couple of months ago I had a patient with a wrist problem, so I went on to choose and book. We found a hand and wrist service—ideal for the job—just down the road from my surgery. "Perfect," one would think. However, the next day when the patient came back to see me I found out that the hand and wrist service did not do hands or wrists. I am not making that up; it actually happened. I had to start again from the beginning. It meant another wasted appointment, a baffled patient, and bemused staff. Eventually, we sorted the matter out with a different hospital.

The choose-and-book server has the interesting habit of throwing the user out at 5 o'clock on a Friday evening. That is not even outside core hours, let alone compatible with the concept of extended hours, which most GP practices across the country are now embracing. When, at 10 minutes past 5 o'clock, one says to a patient, "I'll just book you a choose-and-book appointment," only to find that the server has gone off and will not come back on again until Monday morning, it is, to say the least, irritating. I have never understood why it happens, but it happens very frequently—far too often to be just coincidence.

Even more seriously, it is apparent to me that some acute trusts have tried to get around the 18-week service target simply by saying to the patient, "There are no appointments available." It is a great irritation when one has given the patient a print-out and told them to phone up for the appointment of their choice, for them to be told that there are no appointments whatever. The patient then comes back to see me the following day, which means another wasted appointment. It transpires that hospitals can manipulate the 18-week target if they simply stop offering any appointments. If they do not offer appointments, they cannot miss the target. That might be wonderful from the hospital accountants' point of view, but it is pretty miserable from the point of view of the GP and the patient.

In some areas, however, choose and book has been a runaway success. In Barnsley, for example, about 75 per cent. of all GP referrals are made through choose and book. The key to Barnsley's success is strong leadership from the local primary care trust, which has ironed out the technical glitches and professional resistance and persuaded the secondary care trust to get behind the service and make it patient-friendly. There is no reason why that should not be replicated across the country. There is no shortage of innovative care models involving communications technology that work at local level. In Sheffield, for example, trials are running of a virtual desktop that enables clinicians to access patient records using interactive bedside systems. That reduces the need for staff to keep logging in and out of computers, and cuts down on the endless administrative paper trail.

It is when we try to create IT systems that are capable of being used in more than one place by more than one type of health care professional that we run into problems. As chair of the all-party pharmacy group, one of my biggest frustrations—I am sure that it is shared by the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley), who is also an officer of the group—is that pharmacists are not being given the IT resources that they need to allow them to make full use of the new responsibilities laid out in the new pharmacy White Paper. If they are not connected and integrated, they simply cannot maximise the use of their skills. That is a potentially dangerous problem.

If we are to expect pharmacists to prescribe as well as to provide front-line clinical services, as they should, it is absolute nonsense for them not to have read-write access to the patient clinical record. I shall give an example, because the problem is serious. This morning I did a surgery. I saw a patient with an infection and I wanted to prescribe her an antibiotic. I asked her if she had any allergies—"No, doc, I can take anything." So I typed in the first antibiotic of my choice. A message popped up on the computer saying, "Warning. Patient allergic to this drug." So I said to her, "It says on the computer that you're allergic to this drug." "Oh, yes," she said. "That's right." I asked her if there were any other drugs that she was allergic to—penicillin, for example. "Oh, no, doctor, definitely not." So I typed in "Penicillin", and the message on the computer came up to tell me that she was allergic to penicillin. I said to her, "It says here that you're allergic to penicillin." "Am I, doc? Goodness me. Actually, come to think of it, there are quite a few drugs I can't take," which she had completely forgotten to tell me about a few minutes before.

Woe betide the hapless pharmacist who came across this lady and who might decide to prescribe antibiotics for her, having been told by her that she did not have any allergies, only to find out the hard way that she did. That is a mistake that should not happen. Had the pharmacist had access to the patient record, that would be easily dealt with. It is no longer credible to say that pharmacists cannot have access to the patient care record.

Pharmacists are doing medication use reviews in huge numbers. At present the reviews come back to the practice in paper form. Most of them are no longer handwritten. At least they are now computer-generated, but a piece of paper in the GP's surgery is as much use as a chocolate Easter egg in hell. It is no use whatsoever, because the information on it has to be scanned, taken off that printed record and entered into the patient record, and in many cases that is not going to happen. So the usefulness of the MUR is severely hampered by the fact that if it is not in electronic form, it does not integrate into the patient record. It needs to do so.

I move on to the commissioning of services. Progress in commissioning of new providers has also been very mixed. Many PCTs have a great record when it comes to stimulating the market and commissioning services from community-based providers, such as pharmacists. I am therefore pleased that the Department of Health has taken steps to address this by encouraging PCTs to ensure that there is appropriate pharmacy input in PCT decisions. I hope that this will improve awareness within the PCT. However, it is also clear that the introduction of practice-based commissioning has helped to make more effective use of resources, and is bringing care closer to home for patients.

My patients, for example, are now able to take advantage of community cardiology services. This means that I, as a GP, can book a patient into a community cardiology

[Dr. Stoate]

service for a 24-hour ECG or an echocardiogram within a few days, which in the past would have taken several months. Now it can be done much more easily and quickly, with the patient travelling far less distance to receive that service. It has also reduced the cost by about 30 to 50 per cent. Similarly, those with musculoskeletal conditions are now able to use a local access clinic, where the patient with a back, hip or knee problem can be triaged within a week or two and passed on to the appropriate consultant specialist without the need for extensive waiting and with a much more efficient service than we ever had before.

MRI scans are available to open access by general practitioners. This is a huge advantage. Not only can I now get an MRI scan for a patient within about two weeks of referral, but there are several other benefits. First, the patient does not have to travel, because it is a local service. The machine is mobile and can be moved from surgery to surgery. Secondly, the waiting time is extremely short—only a couple of weeks. Thirdly, GPs can maximise their own clinical skills by making much more use of investigations themselves, and fourthly and possibly more importantly for the NHS, that reduces the need to refer patients to a consultant. This means that there is less pressure on hospitals and gives them more opportunity to maximise the skills that hospitals can provide, which others cannot. It takes the pressure off them and allows them to get on with their job.

The challenge now is to ensure that these examples of best practice are replicated right across the country. I believe we can do that. I have provided many examples this evening to show that that can be done. I visited one of my pharmacy colleagues today, Bipin Patel, who runs a pharmacy in the middle of Bexleyheath, where my practice is based. I was talking to him about how we can reduce prescribing and dispensing errors, particularly in the light of an inquiry that the all-party pharmacy group is to carry out in the near future on dispensing errors. He read out to me a prescription with a very ambiguous message on it. He did not have access to the patient's record, so he had to phone the GP and double check what the GP meant, causing delay and problems for the patient. That is another example in which access to the patient record would be a good thing.

The NHS constitution, which I thoroughly support, allows a review only after a 10-year period. However, it provides for the handbook to be considered every three years and the effects on patients and staff every three years. Perhaps my right hon. Friend will consider the matter in the course of his deliberations, or perhaps it could be discussed in Committee and on Report. Can we ensure that the NHS constitution is reviewed rather sooner than 10 years? That is too long a time. I would advocate that it be reviewed after three years, at the same time as the NHS constitution handbook and the effect on staff. Will my right hon. Friend address that point?

8.33 pm

Dr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest) (Ind): It gives me great pleasure to follow the only practising doctor in the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate). I have to admit that his speed of delivery sometimes leaves me feeling rather breathless, but I admire his turn of phrase.

I welcome the new Secretary of State to his position. I remember arriving in 2001 at exactly the same time, and sitting on the Health Committee for at least two years with him. Since then, his rise has been somewhat more meteoric than my own rather pedestrian progress from this very same Bench. However, I welcome him to his post and echo what the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) said: to have mastered that brief in an extremely short time was pretty impressive.

First may I say, as I have said many times, that there have been great improvements in the NHS, particularly on waiting times and on cancer and cardiac services? However, in some respects, all is still not yet well. The results of patient satisfaction surveys, to which reference has been made, are impressive, but they miss out some matters on which the health service is not working quite so well, and I am afraid that I must draw the Secretary of State's attention to one or two of them. We all know about Mid-Staffordshire, the failure of leadership and the failure of some staff to deliver quality or even safe care, but I have a horrible suspicion that that lack of quality, especially relating to dignity, compassion and communication, is more widespread. My hope is that the NHS constitution can address and alter the situation, but I shall give two examples of matters that have come across my desk recently. I referred to the first in a Westminster Hall debate on 14 May, but, as the Minister who heard me then is no longer in the same post, I shall repeat some of the points that I made on that occasion.

I read out a letter, in its entirety, from an elderly couple who had lost their only son at 31 years old. I shall not put the House through the whole letter, but I shall read one or two extracts just to demonstrate that things are not all well. Those elderly parents said:

"We would arrive to see him, to find him lying in a soaking wet bed, or worse."

They went on:

"Our son had an infection under his nails and was unable to pick things up. This the staff knew about, so why were pills left in the little plastic cup...from the morning and lunch time. Maybe it was because he had no water jug or cup so he had nothing to drink."

They continued:

"Lots of working people have long stressful days, and I know people who went into nursing as a vocation but sadly those days have gone. When someone is training for this job, I'm sure they must learn what is expected from them, and the meaning of the word nurse means to take care of and hopefully give a person dignity, which sadly our son didn't have at times."

They concluded:

"We hope that if either of us should need to go into hospital in the future, that the cleaners do what they're supposed to do and our right to dignity is upheld."

I saw that couple in my advice surgery last Friday. They are still so upset that they cannot face putting in a formal complaint or allowing me to name them. In my view, formal complaints are not much use; they lead just to apologies—not, very often, to any particular change. Even in Stafford, the Healthcare Commission upheld many complaints, but the board either took no notice or was not even aware of them.

In a second example, which was also raised in my advice surgery last Friday, a qualified nurse told me about her mother, who is 88 years old. She fell with a suspected hip fracture and was taken to an accident and emergency department at 7 o'clock. The family arrived at 10 o'clock, but she had not been assessed or seen. Eventually, she had X-rays and was admitted for review because no trauma and orthopaedics team was on duty until the next day.

The daughter, a nurse, felt that there could not be a fracture, because her mother was pain-free and had good movement. Nevertheless, she had to be admitted so that she could be seen by an expert. She had gone six hours without fluids, there were no beds and she remained on a couch in the accident and emergency department. The next day, surprise, surprise, there was no fracture, but she was confused and immobile. When her daughter asked for a glass to give her water, she was told that the tumblers were only for tea, not for water. But this really capped it, the daughter says:

"I was told by the staff nurse that she was dehydrated, confused and with a probable urine infection, but that it was not the nurses' role to make her drink anything."

The last straw came when the patient went to another hospital for rehabilitation; it was discovered that she had been having a large, wrong dose of a sedative in the morning instead of at night.

Those are two examples that show that all is not going well. I hope that the constitution can do something about such problems. Not that long ago, when I was walking to the railway station, I saw a member of staff picking up fag ends outside the station. He said that it was easy to change policies, but very difficult to change people. I thought that extraordinarily astute.

I turn to some of the rights under the NHS constitution. Under the heading "Respect, consent and confidentiality", it states:

"You have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, in accordance with your human rights."

Under the heading "Quality of care and environment" are the words:

"You have the right to be treated with a professional standard of care, by appropriately qualified and experienced staff, in a properly approved or registered organisation that meets required levels of safety and quality. You have the right to expect NHS organisations to monitor, and make efforts to improve, the quality of healthcare they commission or provide."

How will that be enforced? Somehow, Monitor let Stafford hospital through. I believe that Monitor could play a key role, and I hope that it will not let through other aspiring trusts that get the sort of complaints about basic quality of care that I am receiving.

I am bothered about the complaints process. The lack of an automatic independent review is a disaster. As the Secretary of State will be only too well aware, to get an automatic independent review, a person now has to go to the ombudsman, who will be completely swamped. Patients and families will lose the will to persevere that far.

It really is awful that a constitution should be needed to enforce such basic things. I am sure that at this time of year several of us go to mayors' Sunday services in our own patches. I was at one in the little town of Bewdley at the weekend. One of the readings was the parable of the good samaritan, whose moral is "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." We have forgotten the morals of such stories; we have forgotten some of the good parts of human nature. That takes me back to one of the things that we heard in New Zealand on our recent trip to look at the quality of care there. It was a question: "Will your hospital pass the granny test?" In other words, it asks whether a person would be happy for their granny to be treated at the hospital.

I am desperately concerned that we have lost some of the basic duties of the caring professions. The Royal College of Nursing is to be congratulated on its work on dignity. I would like to refer the Minister to an article in May's *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* headed "Doctors and quality improvement". It is by Hockey and Marshall, and is well worth reading. I have a completely different concern about the NHS constitution. I have learned about the difficulties of whistleblowers in various parts of the country, and unless I have missed it, the protection for whistleblowers is not spelt out in sufficient detail or emphasised enough in the Bill.

I turn briefly to the clauses on pharmacy. Unless I have missed something, they do not address most people's major concern, which is prescription charges. I know that people with cancer have recently been exempted from paying them, and that is absolutely marvellous. There is also an inquiry, headed by the president of the Royal College of Physicians, into treatment charges for long-term conditions. I would like the Secretary of State to make absolutely sure that prescription charges are likely to be exempted in the case of HIV/AIDS, as that is now a long-term condition. I was amazed to talk to renal experts in the west midlands who did not realise that transplant patients are not exempted from prescription charges. Such an exemption is essential given that they have to take anti-rejection drugs.

A lot has already been said about smoking and the bits in the Bill relating to tobacco. As many Members have observed, as MPs we wear two hats. We are concerned about small businesses and corner shops, but we have a tremendous desire to stop the young taking up the smoking habit. The nanny state argument does not cut much ice with me. In the case of something like smoking in public places, which is so terribly bad for other people, not just the smoker, the nanny state does not come into it. I am afraid that some of these kids, who are starting to smoke at an amazingly young age, need the nannies of the nanny state to try to make them see sense. I have no objection to bans on advertising or on sales from vending machines. As other hon. Members have mentioned, covers are available which at the press of a button will obscure all the shelves with cigarettes on them, while the press of another button will expose everything, so without moving from the counter, the shop assistant can expose the products, get out the right thing, and then shut them up again. Cancer Research UK assures us that those covers cost only about £200. It would be a great help if small businesses could be given some sort of help with finding that £200—if it is true that it is only that much.

Why, in some places, and from some clinical staff, have we lost some of the best features of human nature—politeness and consideration for others? About 400 years ago, Montesquieu, a French political philosopher, wrote:

"The English are busy; they don't have time to be polite."

[Dr. Richard Taylor]

In some parts of the health service, people can claim that they do not have time to be polite, but that is absolutely no excuse. Webster's dictionary has got it right: it says that politeness is

"marked by or exhibiting an appearance of consideration, tact, deference, courtesy or grace resulting sometimes from sincere consideration of others".

If the NHS constitution had teeth and reminded all staff that common courtesy and politeness are absolutely necessary, it could achieve improvements in parts of the NHS that have not yet been reached.

8.48 pm

Mr. Ian McCartney (Makerfield) (Lab): I apologise to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and to Opposition Front Benchers for not being here at the beginning of the debate. It has been a busy day in the House, with a range of important meetings that I have attended—and enjoyed. In response to the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), I am not an Englishman who is too busy, but I am a Scotsman who represents an English constituency, and I want to be busy on the issue of NHS reform and NHS investment. When I was a Member of this House in 1992, my first Front-Bench job was as Labour health spokesperson. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) is here. We are where we are today only because he campaigned on issues such as smoking and preventive strategies in primary care and because of his commitment and engagement during that period, when the then Government refused to listen to any arguments about investing in the acute sector and in preventive strategies in primary care to improve health care, particularly in working class communities.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to his new post. He and I share a borough, and we share a friendship; indeed, we live minutes away from each other. The fact that he has got this job is a breath of fresh air; that is not because the individual who had it before was not a breath of fresh air, but because ever since he was elected to this House and before, he has seen the importance of a preventive strategy in health care through investment in sport and sport-related issues. As Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, he was the first Secretary of State to link the preventive strategy in health care with other strategies across Government, including sport.

As a consequence our local authority, Wigan council, was the first to introduce free swimming not just for young people but for every single person in the community. We now have thousands upon thousands of individuals taking up healthy pursuits, and the preventive strategy has improved their health due to the intervention of my right hon. Friend. If there had to be a reshuffle, I cannot think of anybody better to take on the portfolio, and I wish him and his colleagues the very best in their efforts to build on the success of the Labour Government's record investment in health care.

May I ask a favour of my right hon. Friend? I will be leaving this House after 22 years for health reasons. I am probably the reason the NHS has had financial problems in the past few years. At least once in each of my 22 years in the House, I have been hospitalised. Because of the NHS, I am looking a very healthy ill person. But given my role as a patient in the NHS, my right hon. Friend could do me a favour if there is any work going after the next election and he is still Secretary of State, as I believe he will be. If he is looking for full-time NHS mystery shoppers, I am up for it.

This Bill and previous innovations in Bills like it are about empowering patients, and it is important that health care provision should not be a passive relationship between health care authorities, doctors, clinicians and other health care professionals. It should be about engagement with the patient, to maximise their opportunity to help manage both their illness and the process of improving from ill health to sustained good health in the years ahead. The Bill will assist in that process.

I have been in favour of direct payments for many years. In the case of social care, I argued the case in Government for direct payments, not to weaken public or community provision but to empower individuals to have a real say in their life as it relates to their health and social care. Yes, direct payments can be controversial, as many changes have been in the modernisation of NHS. My right hon. Friend should engage with trade unions and health care professionals, but he should do so on the basis of taking them on that journey. Direct payments, if well managed, well organised, accountable and in the context of NHS principles and the constitution, will benefit tens of thousands of individuals and their health care in the years ahead. I ask him to pursue that issue with vigour.

As we evolve and develop the role of NHS foundation trusts, it is important that we find ways to make them even more accountable to the local communities in which they operate. Whether a foundation trust is acute or non-acute, it is critical that the bureaucracy of establishing it does not create barriers to the community's involvement in its management and decision making in a wider sense. That could include decisions on the professionalisation of the board memberships, or ensuring that individual communities—particularly working class communities, if Members do not mind my saying so—can engage in the decision-making process about the services that the trust provides. Trusts must reflect the priorities of the communities in which they reside.

As we establish foundation trusts, for which I argued in government, it is important that communities are engaged to the fullest extent. We must bring together local government and other partners to plan and provide services, and we must ensure that community groups and organisations are an integral part of the consultation process on the development and improvement of those services. Where it is appropriate, local community organisations should be involved in the delivery of those services as well.

I turn to the specific issue of children's smoking. I do that not just because of the extensive work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley—I was a supporting act to him when I was on the Front Bench in the 1990s—but because I represent a constituency in the north-west of England that has been devastated by the twin effects of poverty and smoking-related diseases. Literally thousands upon thousands of untimely deaths in the past decade can be attributed to smoking.

Smoking takes a heavy toll on the lives of the people in the communities of the north-west, with 14,000 deaths a year in our region. It exacerbates health inequalities and has a negative impact on children and young people.

That is the history of the north-west of England. As a consequence of decisions in previous legislation, we now have the capacity to break that horrific cycle of smoking, poverty and inequality. However, there is a loophole, and I shall talk about that in a moment.

The prevalence of smoking in the north-west region is the highest in England, with 23 per cent. of the population smoking—25 per cent. of men and 22 per cent. of women. As many as 22 per cent. of 14 to 17-year-olds smoke in the north-west, despite the fact that it is now illegal to sell cigarettes to under-18s. In November 2007, leaders of local authorities, community groups, the NHS and young people's organisations came together to set out a bold vision of a tobacco-free future for our children and young people in the region. In June 2008, local authorities and health service leaders throughout the region decided, on a non-party-political basis, to build on that initiative. They made a new pledge to

"make smoking history for the region's children"

and agreed that a fully funded and effective national tobacco strategy needed to be developed.

There was a public consultation exercise, and 60,000 responses from people in the north-west accounted for around two thirds of the total 96,000 responses that the Department of Health received to its future of tobacco control strategy. That was a huge response from a community devastated by the effects of smoking.

The response is consistent with the findings of the survey conducted last June, with north-west residents expressing overwhelming support for further measures to protect children from tobacco. Smokers and non-smokers expressed such support. It is interesting that smokers themselves recognised the dangers to young people of either commencing or being encouraged to commence smoking and continuing to do that. The survey was not simply of people who are opposed to smoking in all circumstances. It included a huge proportion of smokers, who were encouraged to start smoking in their earlier years.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: As a fellow north-west Member of Parliament, I know that some of the evidence that covers our region, in particular areas where there is a high prevalence of clubs and private premises, shows that the availability of vending machines is one of the main reasons for children's early access to cigarettes. Is the right hon. Gentleman therefore moving towards supporting our approach on the relevant aspects of the Bill?

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman needs to hear the rest of my speech. I will comment on that particular approach—I am not so sure that it is a Conservative party approach, although I welcome that party's late conversion. It used to be a mouthpiece for the tobacco industry—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) may say, "Oh no, he's being partisan", but I was here year after year, in debate after debate, for Queen's Speech after Queen's Speech, when Conservative Ministers refused to take action. Consequently, thousands of unnecessary deaths and illness occurred in the defence of the tobacco industry.

Mr. Barron: My right hon. Friend will recall that Labour Members often said that the Conservative party was addicted to the tobacco industry.

Mr. McCartney: It was addicted to that, to the drinks industry and to anything that required defending the indefensible. However, I understand the point of the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), whom I like. He has been very kind to me—indeed, he sometimes offers me lifts to the House. I have not been able to persuade him to vote Labour, but I have been trying to get him to stop smoking for years, and I hope that he has.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: For four years.

Mr. McCartney: It just shows how much I notice on those journeys, but I welcome the fact.

The survey was interesting. Eighty-nine per cent. agreed with banning retailers from selling tobacco if convicted of selling to under-age smokers. The overwhelming majority took the position that if people continue to sell illegally, they should not be able to trade. Another significant figure is that 86 per cent. supported licensing retailers to sell tobacco, with licences being revoked if retailers sold to under-age smokers, while 81 per cent. agreed with the idea of a ban on smoking in cars with passengers aged under 18.

Some 79 per cent. would also support a crackdown on smuggling, which is a critical issue in the north-west, so perhaps we can discuss smuggling when the Bill comes back to the Floor of the House. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may know this, but an anti-smuggling exercise has been conducted in our borough over the past few days that has led to a massive haul of illicit cigarettes and financial resources from organised crime networks. Around two thirds of respondents supported ending the sale of cigarettes through vending machines, stopping the sale of packs of 10 cigarettes and the removal of displays of tobacco on premises on which it is sold. Such surveys demonstrate a desire among smokers and non-smokers alike across the north-west to protect children from tobacco and its effects.

This excellent Bill has been through the other place, but clauses 22 and 23, which deal with the power to prohibit or restrict sales from cigarette vending machines, should go further and allow for a full ban from the outset. I accept that we should strike a balance, particularly in the current economic climate, between the rights of businesses to carry on legal trade and the need to stop children from purchasing cigarettes, but let us be quite clear. Tobacco is the only product that can be sold legally that kills its customers on a daily and recurrent basis. That is why the tobacco industry requires the fuel of publicity and investment to restrict the effects of legislation aimed at preventing people from taking up smoking in the first place. Given that the industry has that view of itself and given the disproportionate number of children using such machines, as compared with adult smokers, we should put children's health first and ban such machines completely.

In 2006, one in six children in England who were regular smokers usually bought their cigarettes from vending machines. In contrast, in 2008, only one in 20 adult smokers said that they had bought cigarettes from vending machines over the previous six months. Vending machines are a convenience to get round bans and encourage young people to take up smoking, which will lead to premature death and, with absolute certainty,

[Mr. McCartney]

cause injuries to their hearts, lungs and other parts of their anatomy. The British Heart Foundation has estimated that machines are the source of cigarettes for around 46,000 children in England and Wales. We could fill up my right hon. Friend's Everton ground with children who regularly use vending machines and still have 11,000 outside. Think about it, Madam Deputy Speaker: the whole of Goodison Park filled with children smoking their heads off who will not see Everton win the European cup 20 years from now—*[Laughter]*—this is a serious point—because they will fall ill prematurely and die, because they have been encouraged to take up smoking by the tobacco industry.

Calculations by the British Heart Foundation in 2006 suggested that around 45 million cigarettes were sold to 11 to 15-year-olds through cigarette vending machines. Think about it, Madam Deputy Speaker: that is equivalent to the size of a major European country, almost the total population of England. Think about it: children as young as 11 and under being able to buy cigarettes from vending machines. It does not seem feasible, but that is the reality. Would we allow children to seek access to vending machines for alcohol, fireworks or other products, such as glue? Of course we would not: they are dangerous to children. However, the most dangerous substance of all to children, with absolutely certainty, is tobacco, yet we allow them to purchase it in their thousands on a daily basis through vending machines.

That is why the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research UK, Smokefree Northwest and other organisations have been campaigning for a ban. That is also why more than 110 Members have supported early-day motion 768, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), which calls for such a ban. Imposing such a ban would close a loophole. I have said that it is hard to imagine the sale of solvents, alcohol, fireworks or knives in vending machines; if it is not right to sell those products in that way, it is certainly not right to sell tobacco in that way either.

The fact that cigarettes remain available in vending machines is an anomaly, and we need to tackle it in order to stop the harm being done to our children, and to prevent another generation from missing out on longevity and a healthy and safe lifestyle. We cannot simply leave this to an industry that needs to replenish its dying customer base on a daily basis by allowing our children to be undermined in this way. The only thing that our nation has to ensure its longevity is its younger generation. What we hand on to them must be different from and better than what was handed on to our generation. Yet, each year, we stand back and watch the undermining of the capacity of another generation of young British children to be the best that they can be, because we are doing nothing to prevent the tobacco industry and its allies from allowing our children to gain free access to tobacco products through vending machines.

Last week, I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson)—this shows how much I knew about the reshuffle—asking whether I could meet him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo) to discuss the possibility of improving clause 22 and ensuring that we could achieve a total ban on cigarette vending machines. I feel extremely strongly about this, as do hon. Members on both sides of the House. I do not claim to feel more strongly about it than anyone else, but I am the grandfather of 10 grandchildren, and I want to ensure that every one of them—representing all children—lives to adulthood and becomes a grandparent and a great-grandparent.

I look around my constituency, and I see too many people in their 40s, and even in their 30s, dying of smoking-related diseases. They never go on to become the best that they could be. They never go on to become a grandparent or a great-grandparent. Some of them die a nasty, tobacco-related death just as their lives are coming to fruition and their relationship with the next generation of their family is just beginning. Why is it that someone in my constituency who is 40 years of age has only a 25 per cent. chance of survival following a smoking-related heart attack? Fifty per cent. of my constituents who have had a heart attack from tobacco-related heart disease die at home, before they even get access to the emergency services. Of the remaining 50 per cent., half die on their way to hospital. Only the remaining 25 per cent. have an opportunity to continue their lives, which might be saved through intervention and heart surgery. This is carnage on a grand scale, and it is unacceptable.

Clause 22 needs to be strengthened. If my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State cannot respond to my request for a ban this evening, will he please meet me and other hon. Members to discuss the matter? It is a matter of life and death. We have come so far and done so much in the teeth of great opposition. People said that the smoking ban would not work, yet it has received major public acceptance. It is not true to say that businesses have closed down as a result of the legislation. In the years to come, hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens who might otherwise have suffered ill health and premature death will not now do so, because of the work that we have done in the House and the ban that we have imposed.

My proposal represents the final piece of the jigsaw. I implore my right hon. Friend, in his new post, to be brave and not to take heed of those who claim that this would be a regulation too far. I would introduce a thousand regulations if they saved a thousand children's lives. I would introduce a million regulations if they would save a million lives. Over the next 20 years and beyond, the actions that we have already taken will save that number of lives, but we need to prevent young people from smoking in the first place, and ensure that we do not give them access to cigarettes for the convenience of an industry that wants to use vending machines to get round the existing legislation. We must close this loophole and save tens of thousands of children from illness and premature death in the years to come. Be brave—get the ban in!

9.10 pm

Mr. Lee Scott (Ilford, North) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion and wish him well.

I start by praising NHS staff—our doctors, nurses and all other staff—for the wonderful work that they do. That is worth putting on the record. I was proud to vote for the ban on smoking, and we have just heard an

impassioned speech on that subject. I truly believe that voting for the ban is one of the best things that I have done since becoming an MP. I hope that the proposal to introduce a display ban is evidence-based. If I am convinced that it is, I will vote for it, but any legislation should take account of any losses to the businesses involved.

It is slightly hypocritical for some Labour Members to say that Conservative Members are addicted to smoking. Unless I am very much mistaken—it may be a selective memory loss—I rather think that the former Prime Minister might have had an addiction to Formula 1 and the advertising of smoking. Perhaps there is some addiction on both sides of the House. *[Interruption.]* I am pleased to hear that some Labour Members spoke against that.

I welcome the concept of an NHS constitution, but I am of the view that what the Bill proposes needs to go further. We need to stop any interference from Whitehall and the constitution needs to recognise that it should be left to professionals to control the day-to-day running of the national health service. Managers, doctors and other health care workers are frustrated by the one-size-fits-all system and structures imposed from the centre. It is time to set them free and to trust them to use their professional judgment.

Health care inequalities exist, so it is not sufficient to focus purely on treatment. The real priority must be recognising the causes that led to those problems. Poverty, family breakdowns and location all play a part. It is time to start fixing the problems. It is not just where we are born, however, as where we live can have the most devastating impacts on the care that we receive.

I welcome the fact that, according to the constitution, drugs approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence will now be available to all who need them, but how can we explain a doctor having to tell a patient that they cannot have a drug that has not been recommended by NICE? We must look further at that problem. If a national health service is to mean anything, it must mean that treatment is prescribed on the basis of clinical need and not home address. Such key issues should be set out in the NHS constitution handbook only after the Secretary of State has guaranteed a wide consultation with interested bodies. Those involved at the sharp end deserve to have their views taken into account—they know best; far better than us. I believe that many of us would share the view expressed by Age Concern that dignity must be at the heart of the NHS. The constitution must provide a firm guarantee of the care that older patients can expect.

The constitution has some omissions. For example, where is the recognition of the vital role played by dedicated staff and the need to support them? Also absent is any move to give patients a meaningful say over their health care. The Government may say that they are determined to engage clinicians, but is it not true to say that the early drafts barely mentioned general practitioners? It is widely reported that the Royal College of General Practitioners had to fight to get GPs in the constitution. In fact, is it not also true to say that the constitution is, in its current stage, nothing more than engagement and window dressing? I say that without wearing any stiletto heels.

I move on to touch briefly on the issue of innovation prizes. I do not have a problem with rewarding staff, but I do have a problem with how it will be funded and carried out. Getting the NHS suspension policies absolutely right is vital. If we do not do so, we will end up unable to sack senior managers who have proved to be utterly hopeless—or we will see them walk away with huge payouts. The former chief executive of the Barking, Havering and Redbridge NHS Trust in my area walked away with a payoff after working up a £90 million deficit, which I personally find disgusting. I pay tribute to his successor, John Goulston, and his team for turning the situation round. Rewarding failure should no longer be an option. Failed managers should no longer be re-employed by the NHS as consultants and paid with public money.

The Bill also attempts to deal with the quality of provision, stating that quality accounts must be produced by all health care providers working for or on behalf of the NHS. I seek some reassurance from the Minister on the accuracy of those data. I am sure that I am not alone in asking whether those supplying the information would not be best served by predicting as rosy a picture as possible. There needs to be rigour. That means publishing only the unvarnished truth, including mortality rates and other key data. Patients will not be empowered unless they know the real story. We must stop talking only about patients' rights. The facts must speak for themselves, so that patients can make up their own minds about where and by whom they want to be treated.

Two years ago, the new Secretary of State for Health told the Fabian Society that the next decade would be all about quality, not quantity. Why, then, is Labour still doggedly focused on targets? Even Tony Blair's former adviser admits that they are inherently flawed. Perhaps if the Government had not failed to act on the advice of the new Secretary of State for Health to the Fabian Society, the families of those who have died in places such as Mid Staffordshire would not be grieving today. That is a classic example of the way in which clinical judgment suffers when targets are prioritised. Labour saw the problem—the fault line that threatened to rupture the foundations of its own policy—but, instead of being responsible and doing something about it, lumbered on without regard for the consequences. It is time to stop putting one's own political survival first and to put patients first instead.

I want to make three brief points in the limited time available to me. Over the past three years, medical negligence payouts in the London region have totalled a quarter of a billion pounds, with the first amount going to the legal profession rather than the patients involved. That must be looked into as a matter of urgency. When accusations have been made against doctors—I refer not to malicious accusations, but to accusations with substance—those doctors must be suspended while investigations take place.

I also want to say something about the accuracy of checks on doctors' qualifications. In my own trust, a Mr. Iwegbu, who used to call himself Professor Iwegbu, has now been told that he can no longer use that title. We do not yet know the reasons, but all qualifications of all doctors must be checked as a matter of principle to ensure that they are what they say they are, and to ensure that the patients on whom they operate know who is treating them.

Earlier, the Secretary of State spoke about what he described as the achievements that had been made

[Mr. Lee Scott]

over the lifetime of the Labour Government. All I can say is that this Labour Government may now be receiving life support.

9.18 pm

Mr. Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) on his impassioned speech. I also thank the Secretary of State for his response to my intervention on his speech at the beginning of the debate, and apologise to him for not being able to be present for the whole of the opening speeches. It was not just the parliamentary Labour party that had other meetings to attend during the debate. I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the fact that I too had other things to do.

Before I comment on the details of the Bill, I want to return to the point that I made in my intervention. The Secretary of State has a large in-tray, and he has demonstrated today that he is getting on top of it quickly. One of the items he will find in it is the apparent disappearance of the community hospital development fund. I remind him that in 2005-06, when the NHS faced substantial deficits in trusts around the country, more than 82 community hospitals were threatened with closure. That caused a furore across the country.

When he took up his post, the Secretary of State's predecessor, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), sought to end the furore by magicking up a capital pot of money—some £750 million—for community hospital redevelopment. That was very welcome. The issue went away, and those campaigning to save their hospitals were able to divert that energy to seeking to improve their community hospitals. In the first full year, close to £250 million of the funds were allocated for community hospital rebuilding. It was a three-year programme of £250 million a year, and the first year's sum was allocated.

One of three threatened hospitals in my constituency, Ludlow community hospital, was in dire need of investment. It was still operating in old Victorian workhouse premises as well as having facilities that had wards closed, and therefore the property was beginning to deteriorate and decay. The community got behind it and worked hard with the local authority to put together a base-case business plan for a renovation of the hospital, which, with the support of the primary care trust and the active support of the strategic health authority, turned into a bid for a significant sum for rebuilding the hospital.

It was an innovative project to co-locate the hospital and the GP surgeries in the town. The bid was supported as a top priority by West Midlands strategic health authority, or so we were told, and it went to the Department for approval. Having been encouraged to submit such a proposal, the PCT received a letter from the SHA less than a month ago saying that the funding had been put on hold and that no more funds would be made available, and that we would have to look elsewhere if we wished to fund the project going forward. The community is determined to do so and a great deal of work is continuing, but the sudden news that no money was available, our having been told that a further £500 million would be available, was immensely disappointing. I sincerely hope the Secretary of State will do his utmost to find out where that money has gone and to put it back on the table, and thereby allow communities throughout the country to access it. I look forward to his fulfilling the commitment to review that decision, which he gave at the beginning of the debate. That does, of course, square with the Government's plans to bring forward public sector investment to help rejuvenate the economy from the recession, so it is in line with Treasury thinking.

I want to make two points about the Bill. First, I welcome clause 33 on the investigation of complaints about privately arranged or funded adult social care, which also has resonance for my constituents. My constituency has a significantly above-average elderly population. Some 24 per cent. of my constituents are above retirement age and the proportion of over-80s rises inexorably every year as both the standards of health care and longevity increase. As a consequence, there is an increasing need for adult social care provision and many of my constituents make contributions to their provision as they come to need it. At times, of course, problems arise with the arrangements for their adult social care and therefore a proper complaints procedure is required.

It is right that the Government are seeking to put in place an effective mechanism to allow for complaints to be dealt with, so that redress can be given for decisions affecting some of the most vulnerable elderly people in our community. They currently do not have much of a voice at that stage, but they will now be able to make appeals and, hopefully, secure redress where previously none existed. I look forward to seeing the detail that emerges in Committee to ensure that the system is effective, and that it is not merely window dressing so as to give a complaints procedure without teeth. Therefore, at least in principle, the proposal is to be applauded.

I am less keen on the proposals for the display ban on advertising, which has taken up a lot of time. I am no advocate for the tobacco industry, although it was suggested that some Conservative Members are. I suspect that almost every Member could bring to the attention of the House heart-rending tales of relatives, friends or constituents who have suffered the effects of a lifetime of smoking. My grandfather died from lung cancer. I have never smoked in my life—I have no intention of taking it up—and I encourage my children not to do so, but I firmly believe that if we are to introduce further measures to restrict the availability of tobacco to young people, it must be done on an evidential basis.

There is an illogicality in the Government's approach. They use taxation as the main means of reducing smoking in this country—I have sat through enough Finance Bills to know the arguments in favour of that. This country has the second highest price of tobacco in the EU, at £5.85 for a packet of 20; only Ireland levies more tax than we do on tobacco products. The tax that the Government generate from every sale of duty-paid tobacco is greater than the retail price in every country in the EU save Ireland and France.

Taxation is, appropriately, the major mechanism used by the Government to restrict the consumption of tobacco, but many other measures have been introduced in recent years, most of which have yet to take effect. The proportion of young people taking up smoking has declined in this country year on year, which is to be applauded and

welcomed. My concern is that some of the measures, in particular the display ban, will have perverse, unintended consequences and are unnecessary at this time for two reasons.

The first reason relates to the evidence base, to which reference has been made, in particular by the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor). He made a powerful speech, but I fear that he has not captured the essence of the evidence—it is, at best, not clear-cut. We need to see clear-cut benefits—the reduction of young people's smoking—before we embark on a display ban that will have significant ramifications for the people who will be most directly affected: the retailers, in particular the convenience store retailers, the corner shops and the confectioners, tobacconists and newsagents.

Every community in our country benefits from such shops. Some 48,000 or so outlets sell tobacco, the vast majority of which are community shops that serve their local communities and happen to sell tobacco as one of their products. Such shops are typically independently owned. Some may be part of a small family-owned chain. Few of them have the capital resources to invest significantly in fulfilling the requirements of the display ban and many of them generate a substantial proportion of their turnover from the sale of tobacco products. It has been estimated that close to 12 per cent. of them—more than 2,500 shops—would go from generating profit to generating loss as a result of the proposal, and that would put close to 2,500 communities out of touch with their local shop, which provides their convenience shopping and allows them to shop within their own community. That significant potential negative of introducing a display ban has not been adequately thought through in the economic impact assessment that the Government have undertaken in examining the measures. As a result, the proposal should be put on hold. We should wait to see the impact of some of the other legislation that the Government have put through—

Mr. Barron *rose—*

Mr. Dunne: I am about to finish, so I am not going to give way.

In particular, we should see the impact of measures that came into effect only on 1 April under the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008, which specifically introduced the concept of negative licensing for retailers who are found to be selling tobacco to under-18s. That provision has been in force for two months and there has not been a single prosecution under it, because it requires three offences before a prosecution can be brought. Thus, it seems completely nonsensical to introduce additional legislation precisely to target that user group—the under-18s—and stop them smoking when there is legislation that will have an opportunity to be much more effective in directly addressing the Government's concerns. We should see how that works before introducing this unnecessary and potentially very damaging measure.

9.30 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): If we needed any more evidence that this Government are a tad short of support, we only have to recall the notable absence of Labour Members from the debate on this so-called flagship Bill. There was a notable absence of almost every Labour Member between 6 pm and 7 pm, for some reason or another—*[Interruption.]* It is interesting that they do not want to be reminded of that.

The Bill's 36 pages contain 10 policy areas that are completely inconsistent with each other. There is little vision for our NHS and much tinkering with legislation that the Government should have got right first time round. As with so many of this Government's Bills, much of the substance lies in secondary legislation, for which drafts are not yet available, even though the Bill has already been through the other place and there has been plenty of time for the Department to prepare them. The Government probably would not provide time to debate them anyway. This is a wash-up Bill from a washed up Government.

Nevertheless, owing to the wide-ranging nature of the Bill we have had an interesting debate with contributions, in the end, from those on both sides of the House. I take this opportunity to welcome the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) back to our health debates, now as the Secretary of State. We will see whether his loss to the blue shirts at Goodison Park will be a gain to the blue scrubs of our hardworking NHS staff. Also, I congratulate the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Corby (Phil Hope), on retaining his post and I welcome the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron). I welcome too the Minister of State, the right hon. and learned Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien). As well as surnames, we have shared debates before, and I look forward to his generous acceptance of many of our amendments in Committee.

The NHS constitution was published in January this year. It is typical of the Prime Minister, who wants to return power to Parliament, that he held a closed signing ceremony in Downing street for this booklet, the contents of which have never been debated in Parliament—and still had not been at the time of the launch. It is right that our NHS should have a constitution. Like a number of proposals in this Bill, it is resonant of Conservative pledges of some years ago. But for such a constitution to be more than just print on paper, it must be put on a statutory footing. It is questionable whether this would make it a lawyers' charter: as the Government have said, many of the principles of the constitution are already underpinned by legislation.

We have called for the 10 core principles of the Government's NHS plan to be put in the legislation. It is worrying that a Labour Government, even such a tired one, have cut that number down to seven. The Government's own Back Benchers, along with everyone on this side of the House, should worry that the Government have discarded principle 7, which is:

"Public funds for healthcare will be devoted solely to NHS patients".

Indeed, it was the new Secretary of State, when he was a Minister, who made the decision. Where too is the principle that states the need to value NHS staff? In Committee, we will look to enshrine those and other principles in the legislation.

I note that we heard a speech from the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) who calls himself a practising GP and was concerned about the absence of GP-led commissioning as a principle. The doctor from Dartford made the biggest case yet to all his colleagues who wish to stop Members having a second job.

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

As for quality accounts, there is no doubt that, as we move the NHS towards greater patient choice, patients should have good data with which to make their choices. As yet, the Government have given insufficient assurance that quality accounts will be substantive pieces of work rather than silver-tongued advertising. The example that the Government have published—that of Sunnyview hospital—hardly inspires confidence.

We heard, too, from the other doctor in the House, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor), who made an impassioned speech about what quality of care really means and what a vocation to nurse really means. He had hoped that the constitution could help to ensure that that becomes much more of a reality.

We also heard a very important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs. Miller), who made a number of points that ranged right across the Bill. In addition to her comments on the effect of the cap on some of the services at her local hospital, she made a most interesting point, which I had not yet understood, about the concern that children's trusts will not be required to have regard to the NHS constitution. That is of particular concern if children's trusts effectively end up as commissioners for children's services, with a legal footing equivalent to that of primary care trusts. My hon. Friend made an important contribution that will no doubt feature in our discussions in Committee.

On direct payments, it will be good to see those on the Government Benches going through the Division Lobby this evening in favour of this opportunity for greater patient choice. We are, of course, a little surprised to see that provision encapsulated in legislation, despite the fact that we have been calling for direct payments since 2004. The Government rejected them in 2006, in a debate on the White Paper "Our health, our care, our say". The then Health Secretary—there have been a number of Health Secretaries—the right hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt), called them a

"revival of the patient's passport".—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2006; Vol. 442, c. 29.]

For the sake of the 15 million patients with long-term conditions and for the sake of our NHS, I am glad that the Government have changed their mind.

The hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) made some important points about direct payments. She asked about direct payments for maternity care, and that is an issue we shall need to explore in Committee. It struck me as a little odd, as mothers are supposed to have choice already. As Liberal Democrat spokesperson, she showed important support for pilots. However, what matters is that the Government should for once move away from their addiction to pilots and use them to produce an assessment and a proper review before rolling them out, so that the benefits can be enjoyed by all rather than simply by some selected places.

Most interestingly, we heard a powerful speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young), who has long experience in this area. He made the very important point that we needed clarity about where direct payments will have an impact in relation to the top-ups that have caused some inconsistency in approach. Again, I hope the Government will take that on directly in Committee and that they will ensure it is explored.

We heard a powerful and impassioned speech by the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney). He talked, among other things, about preventive health care—I think I heard him say that he did not believe that was a partisan point. He and I are London neighbours—just as he is a neighbour of the Secretary of State up in the north-west—and, as he said, he and I have in the past shared some of the great benefits of the NHS as well as some of the challenges that face its future.

Let me move on to innovation prizes. Like so much of the Bill, they arise from Lord Darzi's next stage review of the NHS. An unspun reading of that document is "Things the Government have failed to do since 1997". Supporting innovation in the NHS is one of those things. Lately, we have had the Health Innovation Council, created in October 2007, which has met only twice—the last time was in April 2008. The Government created the nine NHS innovation hubs in 2004, whose irrelevance might be linked with their coterminosity with regional development agencies. The NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement and the National Innovation Centre were established in 2005.

It is common ground that well-motivated staff need no prizes for innovation. Those of us who have had experience outside this place—in my case, in manufacturing industry—know that company employees see it as part of their job. In the NHS, we have one of the most engaged, professional and hard-working work forces in the world. However, under this Government their morale has been perennially crushed and it is that demotivation, more than anything else, that stifles the sense of energy and optimism that is needed to fuel innovation, enthusiasm and an acceptance of new ideas and change. I was pleased to note that the Chairman of the Health Committee, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron), had some important points to make about trying to disentangle the idea of imposing a process from getting at what changes behaviour and motivates people not just to innovate but to have their innovations championed, accepted and implemented.

Although they may not look like it, the Government's plans for trust special administrators are among the most worrying aspects of the Bill because they would change the nature of foundation trusts. Instead of final responsibility lying with foundation trust governors, and ultimately the independent regulator—Monitor—it will lie with the Secretary of State. That may sound like a good thing superficially, but what good is it for governance in any business and how is incentivisation to be accountable if people know that their bad decisions on risk will ultimately be bailed out by the Government?

There are also concerns about the power of the Secretary of State over trust special administrators, given that he can direct the meetings they hold. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) emphasised in a powerful opening speech, a transparent failure regime is required, so we shall need to look long and hard at those proposals in Committee.

The move to pharmaceutical needs assessments is welcome. It is clear that such questions should be determined locally rather than nationally. We shall, however, seek assurance from the Government in Committee that their proposals will not impede access

to services from patients who currently benefit from dispensing GPs. Patient choice must be the priority in pharmaceutical needs assessments.

One of the arguments the Minister will no doubt use in favour of trust special administrators relates to the recent tragedies at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, but that is to shut the door after the horse has bolted. The real question that the new Secretary of State must answer is how the hospitals were ever given foundation trust status in the first place—ultimately solely the decision of the Secretary of State. Events at Mid Staffs and at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells also inform the suspension clauses in the Bill. The Minister will have to answer questions about why those proposals were originally left out of the Government's legislation. We shall seek assurances that the powers will not be abused—for example, by suspending people who ought to be fired. The speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott), which drew a parallel with the provisions relating to doctors, was extremely well made.

Members on both sides of the House will have their own opinion about the tobacco clauses. Some will see them as too draconian and others will consider them too liberal. Each speaker in the debate touched on that part of the Bill. The right hon. Member for Makerfield made a particularly impassioned speech in that regard, but all Members made important contributions and the debate is to be joined.

It is clear that any action taken to reduce smoking must be based on solid evidence, and the Committee will provide a good opportunity to discuss the evidence base for the Government's proposals. I hope the Government will consider how to enable evidence to be put to the Committee. Will they pursue the ideas for determining such matters handed down to us by the other place, such as restricting access to public area vending machines, or a bar or ban on their use, to prevent children from getting hold of cigarettes? We heard contributions on that point from the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), from the Chairman of the Health Committee and from my hon. Friends. If the evidence is weak, the emphasis must be more on the thoughts and feelings of Members, so we have given our side a free vote on that matter. I hope the Minister will confirm that his colleagues will be allowed a free vote, too.

Dispensing doctors have expressed concern about the move to pharmaceutical needs assessments. We must consider those concerns in Committee.

We have talked about the important aspect of adult social care in relation to clause 33. I hope we shall be able to cover it in Committee, too, but it is now 8 June and the Government promised the Green Paper on the subject in the spring. We thought that as carers week starts today, the Green Paper might be published today, but it is still not available. I hope the Minister responsible will be able to give us an indication about that.

A welcome amendment was made in the other place to enable the Secretary of State to support better NHS-funded care for patients in foundation trusts. However, Lord Warner told the other place that he repented of the sin of including the provision, which was, he said, only

"sops to parts of the Labour Party".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 May 2009; Vol. 710, c. 656.]

He pointed out that the cap is arbitrarily applied across the NHS. Important speeches showed that a change from what has been handed to this place for consideration would deny people certain services.

In a parallel contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne) made a powerful point about where the funding was for the resurrection of community hospitals and refurbishment in his and other areas. I hope that that issue will be considered.

Clause 35 relates to the difficulties with disclosure of information. The Secretary of State is aware that, since 2005, the Government's actions in that area have been illegal. It was interesting to hear him say—but not in these words—that he would put matters on a better legal footing. That is one way of not having to admit what had gone before.

In supporting Second Reading, I hope we will make sure that we have the parliamentary time needed to scrutinise the Bill. I hope we will have the chance to debate some of its provisions not just in Committee but, if the Government have the necessary courage, on the stump in a general election.

9.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): We have had a wide-ranging debate, with contributions from all parts of the House that touched on almost every aspect of the Bill. I do not think that I will be able to cover all those issues in my closing remarks, but I am glad that the main thrust of the Bill is broadly welcomed by all parties. It was almost a year ago that my noble Friend Lord Darzi produced the landmark next stage review of our national health service. That review was our opportunity to examine what we want for the NHS in the years and decades to come. I point out that that review emphasised the strong foundations that Labour's record investment and reform in the NHS has achieved over the past 12 years. The NHS has gone from having a budget of some £35 billion in 1997 to one of almost £103 billion in 2009—a real-terms increase of more than 100 per cent. That is in stark contrast to the decades before.

We have gone from waiting times for operations of 18 months in the 1990s to the shortest waiting times ever recorded in the NHS. Some 2 million more operations are performed a year than in 1997. There have been dramatic reductions in the number of people dying from cancer, and virtually nobody now waits more than three months for a heart operation. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Dr. Taylor) acknowledged those massive improvements, and he reminded us that we also abolished prescription charges for cancer patients; he wanted us to go further. We are determined to go further. We want to build on that unique success of a Labour Government.

For the future of the national health service, we asked patients, the public and staff what they wanted from their health service in years to come. The result of that extensive, bottom-up consultation will be a health service that builds on that success and puts quality at the heart of its future. It will be a national health service where patients' choice and patient experience is key to driving up the quality of services, and where power to shape and improve services is devolved to the lowest possible level. The Bill will provide the legal framework to achieve the ambition of the next stage review.

[Phil Hope]

We have debated the NHS constitution. The first ever national health service constitution provides an opportunity to safeguard the future of the NHS, reaffirming its core values and refreshing them for the 21st century. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) that the Bill will ensure that the constitution is reviewed at least every 10 years. The Secretary of State will have the ability to revise it in the meantime, although we anticipate that those revisions will be relatively minor amendments to keep the constitution up to date.

I say to the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) that the Bill proposes a new legal duty for all NHS bodies, primary care services, and third-sector and independent providers of NHS services to have regard to the constitution in all their decisions and actions. To my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) I say: yes, the constitution does talk about patients and the public, and their responsibility for their own health and how they behave towards the NHS; that is in clause 2. For the benefit of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), I point out that the constitution includes staff, too. Clause 3 spells out the rights and responsibilities of NHS staff, and commits the NHS to ensuring that staff have clear roles and responsibilities, have personal development and training and line management support, and are engaged in decision making.

For the record, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said that there were no new rights in the constitution; he could not be more wrong. There are three new legal rights in that constitution—the right to make choices about NHS care, the right to vaccines, as recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, and the right to rational decisions about the funding of drugs and treatments. The handbook accompanying the constitutions sets out rights relating to whistleblowing—a point made by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest in his contribution.

The hon. Member for Romsey and other Liberal Democrat Members spoke about integrating health and social care. The hon. Lady is right. She will be pleased to know that we will shortly publish a care and support Green Paper. The issue has been debated in the other place, and a central part of the Green Paper will deal with integrating better health and social care.

The hon. Member for Romsey raised the question of people with visual impairments accessing information from and about the NHS. Yes, the NHS constitution sets out the right not to be discriminated against in the provision of NHS services on the grounds of disability—and yes, disability, which will include visual impairment, is one of the seven equality strands in the Equality Bill. Different parts of Government working together closely on both topics are making sure that the Equality Bill and the NHS constitution go hand in glove.

We spoke a great deal about quality accounts. Health care organisations are at the cutting edge of quality, and we recognise that public reporting can be a spur to the improvement of quality in the NHS. The Bill will place a duty on all providers of NHS services to produce a quality account, setting out information for patients, the public and staff on the quality of the services that they provide. That information will be easy for the patient and the public to understand. I want to assure the hon. Member for Ilford, North (Mr. Scott) that we are working closely with clinicians and others to develop the new measures so that robust quality data feed into those quality accounts.

Our aspiration is not just to achieve minimum standards in the NHS, but to strive for excellence and the highest quality of care for all. Quality accounts will make services more accountable to patients, carers, managers and clinicians, and will allow clinical teams to benchmark their performance, and commissioners and providers to agree on priorities for improvement. I say to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire that this is one of the issues that will come up for debate in Committee.

There is an extensive and inclusive process under way to design the content of quality accounts. All foundation trusts nationally and a variety of other organisations, including the East of England strategic health authority region, are involved. A full consultation will follow. It is right, as I hope the hon. Gentleman would agree, that quality accounts should include a core of nationally consistent information that reflects national priorities. Our ambition is that they go further and reflect local priorities to improve accountability to local people.

We debated direct payments this afternoon. During the consultation for the next stage review, people said clearly and consistently that they wanted greater control of and influence over their health and health care. The Bill will enable primary care trusts to pilot the use of direct payments for health care as part of our wider programme for personal health budgets. If successful, those direct payments may be rolled out nationally through secondary legislation, subject to the approval of Parliament. My right hon. Friends the Members for Rother Valley and for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney) stressed the importance of that. We must get it right, which is why we are piloting personal health budgets, with 70 pilots now approved across every strategic health authority area, covering a range of services and conditions, including long-term conditions, mental health—a point raised by the hon. Member for Romsey—end-of-life care, and services for those with learning disabilities.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) made a thoughtful contribution about how personal health budgets and direct payments will work in practice and the longer-term impact on the national health service. They will include advocacy and support, as he suggested. The pilots were intended to tease out and explore all those issues before we move to secondary legislation. We will, of course, put in place independent evaluation and we will publish the findings. The evaluation will take place alongside the pilots, and we will roll out direct payments for health care only after a review of information gathered from the pilots.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) mentioned innovation. We want to actively challenge people to develop new solutions to some challenging health problems, particularly in areas where innovation appears to be lacking, and we want to reward the best innovation when we find it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) helpfully identified the value of innovation, particularly in information and communication technology. The new innovation prizes are for innovations that directly benefit patients and the public, and the Bill will provide greater flexibility to reward those who are innovative

and help to foster a culture of enterprise and innovation. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley that the prizes need to go further than grants for research, so we will engage staff from all parts of the NHS in that process. We propose to make available a prize fund of £5 million a year for three years, and it will be available to individuals and organisations, because both have valid contributions to make and flexibility is vital.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury mentioned trust special administrators. The majority of hospitals and trusts are performing well and providing high-quality services, but, in the rare cases where a challenged trust fails to turn itself around, it is important to set out clear processes to resolve that failure. The post of trust special administrator, which the Bill creates, will ensure that the organisation continues to provide safe and effective services for patients throughout the regime, and the administrator will then produce a report and consult on proposals for the future of services.

The Government are committed to the fundamental principle that all NHS providers must focus primarily on the provision of care to NHS patients. That is the governing principle behind the private patient income cap, which limits the income that foundation trusts can lawfully earn from private health care. The principle is non-negotiable, but the Government do not want to stand in the way of establishing a fairer system for foundation trusts. There were various contributions on that issue and, in the other place, we gave a commitment about our intention to begin a review, following the outcome of the ongoing judicial review of the existing legislation.

The question is: how do we create the right balance between protecting NHS services to NHS patients and allowing foundation trusts the flexibility that they need to operate effectively and in the best interests of patients? It is vital to ensure that any new legislation is workable and has broad support from the NHS and all key stakeholder organisations. We can see that the issue is complex, because we had that debate this afternoon. We should not rush through a quick fix; we need to get it right.

I am pleased to say that all parts of the House broadly welcomed the pharmacy provisions in the Bill and the measures, which the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Dunne) mentioned, meaning that an individual service-user and anybody acting on their behalf will be able to raise—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but there are far too many conversations going on all around the Chamber. We must hear the end of this debate clearly.

Phil Hope: I guess that that tells us a little about the Opposition's interest in these issues, as compared with that of Government Members. As I was about to say, social care users who arrange their own care will be able to raise a complaint with a local government ombudsman.

Last but not least, smoking is one of the most serious public health challenges and a major cause of health inequality. The aim of Government policy is to reduce the incidence of illness and death caused by tobacco. We have a particular responsibility to protect children and young people from taking up smoking, and that will ensure that young people from all backgrounds have a fair chance to enjoy a healthy life. We had some impassioned, knowledgeable and eloquent contributions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley, my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (David Taylor), the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire and my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield made clear the need for more action. Tobacco marketing through point-of-sale display is no longer acceptable, because we know that it promotes positive attitudes towards smoking, encourages people to start smoking, prompts impulse buying and undermines efforts to quit.

The Opposition's denial on that issue is utterly bizarre, because the evidence exists for the taking of action to remove the display of tobacco products in shops in order to help protect children and young people from the marketing of them and the harm that smoking causes. The Opposition's proposals on proxy purchasing and plain packaging are, if I may say so, a bit of a smokescreen for their failure to address the issues.

There are many aspects of the Bill. Its overall purpose is to help the NHS achieve the high ambitions of the next stage review. We will review the effects of the new requirements on restricting the sale of cigarettes from vending machines; if the requirements are not successful, we will move to ban cigarette vending machines altogether. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

HEALTH BILL [*LORDS*] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order 83A (7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Health Bill [*Lords*]

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 25 June 2009.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—*(Mr. Butler.)*

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 182.

Division No. 143] **[10 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Allen, Mr. Graham
Ainger, Nick	Anderson, Mr. David
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob	Anderson, Janet

Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Crausby, Mr. David
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs. Claire
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Farrelly, Paul
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, rh Keith
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Love, Mr. Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miliband, rh David
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
Oiner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Ptaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheridan, Jim
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Williams, Hywel

Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Frank Roy and Ian Lucas

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dorries, Nadine
Duncan, Alan
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Main, Anne
Maples, Mr. John
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, Mr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Simmonds, Mark
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
Bill Wiggin and Mr. Philip Dunne

Question accordingly agreed to.

HEALTH BILL [*LORDS*] [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52 (1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Health Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Ms Butler.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6, 7, 8 and 9 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Legal Profession

That the draft Legal Services Act 2007 (Registered European Lawyers) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 22 April, be approved.

That the draft Registered Foreign Lawyers Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 22 April, be approved.

COUNTRYSIDE

That the draft Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Establishment of Conservation Board) (Amendment) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.

That the draft Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Establishment of Conservation Board) (Amendment) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 29 April, be approved. —*(Ms Butler.)*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(1)).

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 16162/08, Commission Communication on the impact of free movement of workers in the context of EU enlargement, and, in particular, the Commission's request that Member States consider whether they need to continue to apply restrictions in the light of the situation of their labour markets; and notes that the Government's decisions in respect of Accession workers' access to the UK's labour market, including the decision to continue to maintain restrictions on nationals of Bulgaria and Romania's access to the labour market and to maintain beyond May 2009 the Worker Registration Scheme for nationals of those countries acceding to the EU in May 2004, have taken full and proper account of prevailing labour market conditions in the UK. —*(Ms Butler.)*

Question agreed to.

Oakington Immigration Removal Centre

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Ms Butler.)*

10.16 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to raise on the Floor of the House conditions at Oakington immigration removal centre.

Since I was first elected to Parliament in 1987, immigration and asylum have been at the heart of my concern. They are contentious subjects and there are no votes in them; none the less, whether the House is prepared to take them seriously and afford immigrants and asylum seekers—even failed asylum seekers—humane treatment and due process is a test of our democracy.

A few weeks ago, I visited Oakington immigration removal centre. Following that visit, I want to raise several concerns. My hon. Friend the Minister for Borders and Immigration knows that Oakington is a centre with a troubled past. It was subject to a High Court hearing about its lawfulness as a place for detaining asylum seekers. It was also the subject of a shocking BBC documentary about racist and physical abuse of detainees and, most recently, it received a less than complimentary report from the chief inspector of prisons.

Although I will speak specifically about conditions in Oakington, I do not believe that the problems are unique to Oakington. From recent reports on the United Kingdom's 11 immigration removal centres, it appears that the comments of the chief inspector of prisons also apply to other centres.

I was in the House when it was announced that we would set up detention centres. Like many hon. Friends who were here at the time, I believed the Government when they said that detention would be for a short time and that vulnerable people would not be detained. However, the picture that emerges from reports is of people being kept in detention for longer and longer and of vulnerable people being detained, despite detention being potentially dangerous to their health and well-being.

I draw to the Minister's attention the fact that in 1999, one of his predecessors said, when the opening of Oakington was debated in the House,

"it is important to deal with the claims speedily, and to deal with the people humanely."

She also said that,

"people will stay for only short periods so that their applications can be processed." —[*Official Report*, 9 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 1013.]

We have moved a long way from that and people are being kept in Oakington for unconscionably long periods.

I referred to the history of Oakington and I shall expand on that a little. It was opened in 1999 as a fast-track asylum centre and was seen as a flagship scheme to help deal with the backlog of applications, which existed then as now. It was supposed to house asylum seekers with simple cases, who would stay there for about 10 days before their cases were decided. In September 2001, however, a High Court judge ruled that Oakington was unlawful. The crux of the ruling was that asylum seekers living at Oakington were not allowed to leave the site.

In 2005, the BBC sent in two undercover journalists to work at Oakington and find out how detainees were being treated by private security staff. The programme found that a significant minority of staff were racially and physically abusing detainees. Staff were found boasting about the abuse that they doled out and were also filmed racially abusing detainees. A further cause for concern was that footage was recorded showing those responsible for handling complaints explaining how they either talked detainees out of making complaints or felt protected by their unions.

As a result of that documentary, 15 members of staff were suspended from duty. At the time, Home Office Ministers and Group 4 were quick to say that the shocking footage was the result of the proverbial few bad apples. However, an inquiry into racism at the centre conducted by the prison ombudsman, Stephen Shaw, found a subculture of racism, casual violence and abuse, which he described as a "subculture of nastiness". Visiting the centre recently, I was shocked to find that the very same G4 security manager who was in charge of Oakington at the time of the BBC documentary is still in place. That is unsatisfactory.

The most recent report on Oakington was conducted last October, by the chief inspector of prisons. She said that the centre failed three of the inspectorate's four tests for a healthy establishment. Only 60 per cent. of detainees found that staff treated them with respect, while half the detainees did not feel safe. She concluded:

"This was a disappointing inspection of an establishment which seemed to have lost direction and purpose. The uncertainty about the centre's future was undoubtedly a factor in this, making planning difficult and inhibiting necessary investment…However, this appeared to have infected managers and staff with a short-term, reactive approach. It is important for the UK Border Agency to clarify the future of the centre as soon as possible".

I will return to that.

One of the issues that has been raised with me—not only in relation to the inspectorate's report, but by the many groups and individuals involved in the work at Oakington—is health care. I visited the health care centre, which was clean and seemed well organised, but there are issues with translation, the treatment of HIV-positive detainees and mental health care. Medical Justice is concerned that it no longer receives many referrals from Oakington, now that the Refugee Council does not have a presence there. That may mean that the incidence of mental health issues is smaller, but it may also mean that mental health problems are not being spotted. Medical organisations have evidence that victims of horrific torture, imprisonment and rape are being kept at Oakington. That cannot be a humane way to deal with them.

The other issue that was raised with me, and which I took the opportunity to look into when I visited, was the lack of welfare provision. The Refugee Council had a contract to provide welfare support that was terminated in September 2008. The inspector expressed regret at that. It seems that welfare now rests with either volunteers or the chaplaincy. The chaplains, who are under enormous pressure, do their very best, but I do not think that that provision is appropriate.

Another issue that was raised with me, and which I saw with my own eyes on my visit, was the visitors' room. It is a small, dingy and poorly ventilated room, with tables and chairs that are nailed to the floor. Given that people can be held in the centre for months and months, that is not a suitable place for families to visit. Generally, the facilities at Oakington are clean, but they are starting to look worn and scruffy, all of which flows from the uncertainty about the centre's future.

David Howarth (Cambridge) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady immensely for raising this important subject this evening. May I draw her attention to another recent development at Oakington that is extremely disturbing? Legal advice is no longer available on a 24-hour basis, even though detainees are likely to be brought into the centre at any time. There used to be comprehensive legal cover, but now the Immigration Advisory Service is to be allowed to offer that advice only during office hours, yet, because of the withdrawal of advice from the Refugee Council, which she mentioned, the IAS was basically doing welfare work too.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue.

I want now to talk about the problems of self-harm at Oakington. One of the issues that has been raised with me is the way in which detainees with high levels of distress are treated. One problem is that, when someone is self-harming or has attempted suicide, they are taken to a close care and observation room, allegedly for the purpose of observation. I have visited the room, and it consists of completely bare cells with mattresses on the floor and a guard watching over it. This facility is located in the same part of the building that is used to isolate detainees who have misbehaved. It does not feel like a therapeutic environment; it feels like a place where people are sent to be punished.

I used to work for the Home Office years ago, and for the prison department, and I know that that area looks like a place where rule 41 prisoners are placed in isolation. There was a guard outside the close care and observation room who looked in from time to time. I cannot begin to imagine the effect of that kind of isolation on prisoners who are depressed or have mental problems. That is not a suitable way to hold people with psychological problems. Even the head of the independent monitoring board—who I think could perhaps ask a few more questions about the way in which Oakington is run—said that the close care and observation spaces were a problem.

I am also concerned about the increasing use of force at Oakington. The prisons inspector found that there had been 53 uses of force since 2007, 34 of which had taken place in the first six months of 2008. There is also the question of legal advice, which the hon. Gentleman has just raised. On-site legal advice is provided by the Immigration Advisory Service, which is doing the best it can but is now restricted to offering the service only during office hours, between 9 and 5, even though detainees can be brought to Oakington at any time of the day or night—that is the nature of the system. The independent monitoring board raised concerns in its annual report that the reduction in legal advice services would be harmful to detainees, particularly those with poor English or little knowledge of the availability of legal services and processes.

The Refugee Council is concerned about the inadequate access to legal services, which can lead detainees to be detained for longer than is necessary because they are unable to apply for their right to bail. Home Office statistics show that, in the first quarter of 2009, 2,015

[Ms Abbott]

people had been detained there for longer than a year. I put these questions to Ministers when the matter was initially discussed in the House in 1999, but we were never told that these centres were meant to hold people for a year or more.

Of particular concern are the people from certain communities in Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe who are being held at Oakington. It is unsafe to deport them, so they are being held there indefinitely. Some of those people are among the most depressed and unhappy people at Oakington. That kind of detention—which appears to be indefinite to those unfortunate detainees—is completely unacceptable. There is also the question of age-disputed cases, given the rise in the number of detainees who claim to be under 18 at Oakington. I was concerned about the lack of information about those young people.

The independent monitoring board at Oakington is manned by a group of volunteers, but there has been difficulty in recruiting members. There are only six active members on the board. The board is doing a good job, but I am concerned that it is understaffed. I have also had reports from local residents that they do not think that the board is doing enough to disseminate information about what is going on at the centre.

I was lucky enough to visit Oakington on 15 May, and I met Phil Schoenenberger, who is employed by the United Kingdom Border Agency as the detention services area manager, and Penny Lambert, the chair of the independent monitoring board, as well as Susan Ward and Colin Hodgkins, the long-serving centre manager. I took the opportunity to question them on the chief inspector of prisons' report, and I have to say that their response to its findings was one of the most shocking aspects of my visit to Oakington. Not even Penny Lambert, who is supposed to be the chair of the independent monitoring board, was prepared to admit that something had gone seriously wrong at management level. Instead, what I found was a distinctly defensive attitude and a rejection of what the prison inspector's report had said.

Whenever I raised specific points from the inspector's report, I was greeted with excuses. I asked why the incidents of self-harm had risen and I was told that the centre was getting more distressed detainees. I asked why half the detainees said that they did not feel safe in the centre and Colin Hodgkins said that there were problems with the inspectorate's methodology. In effect, he said that he did not accept the inspector's report. Our inspector of prisons has a deservedly high reputation, but it looks like the response to her report will be a box-ticking exercise because these people will not accept that there is something systematically wrong with the management of Oakington.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, the chief inspector failed Oakington on three or four of its tests, finding that

"detainees expressed high levels of anxiety",

that

"the living environment was poor"

and that the

"management of race and diversity was inadequate".

The independent monitoring board also noted the pressure that the centre was under, with

"officers at Oakington... now working in more stressful conditions",

and it noted

"the length of detention... generally... extended... and there is very little organised occupation"

for the detainees. It is clear that part of Oakington's problems are systemic, so I cannot understand why a manager who has presided over the centre for such a dark period in its history is still there.

Another key problem is the uncertainty, so I would like to ask the Minister to give the House some reassurance that a final decision on Oakington's future will be made very soon. I believe it unacceptable for the centre to be put under more pressure with more detainees staying for longer without recourse to the amount of funding necessary to maintain the buildings and raise the level of service. A lot of the problems I have talked about tonight are attributable to detainees being kept at Oakington for long and unforeseen periods of time.

My final point is a simple one. If the Home Office insists on detaining people for what are essentially administrative purposes, given that they have, after all, committed no crime, those people must be detained humanely. Immigration detention is not intended to be punitive, although some of us argue that it seems to be becoming so, and it should not be treated as such. What I have seen of Oakington with my own eyes, heard from visitors and individuals working there and read in the inspector's report suggests that the centre is not providing a service under which detainees are detained humanely. I think that the experience people receive at Oakington, over and above the deprivation of liberty, is in many ways punitive. I would like to know what Ministers are doing to cut the length of time that immigrants are detained in immigration detention, what the Home Office is doing to improve the lot of those who are detained and, above all, when Ministers are going to reach a decision on the future of Oakington detention centre.

10.33 pm

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) on securing this debate, continuing her long-term interest in both this particular facility and in the wider issues. I also welcome the intervention of the hon. Member for Cambridge (David Howarth), who has tabled questions and corresponded with me. I believe that the centre is just outside his constituency. The centre is also close to the constituency of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—*[Interruption.]*—I apologise, it is in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It is good to see him in his place this evening and I thank him for his correction.

Let me try to answer the questions put to me. The wider context is that the UK Border Agency has 11 immigration removal centres, providing 3,000 bed spaces, predominantly for individuals who are awaiting removal or whose applications are being processed under the detained fast-track arrangements. Detention is an essential part of the Government's commitment to operate a firm but fair immigration and asylum policy by assisting us to remove those who do not qualify for leave to remain here and who refuse to leave the UK voluntarily or who would otherwise abscond.

The estate provides a range of types of accommodation to meet the needs of the agency and detainees. Oakington is one of the centres used to hold lower-risk individuals. That is reflected in the security arrangements, and in the way in which the centre operates. As my hon. Friend said, it has been functioning since 2000, when it opened as a reception centre for new asylum applicants. It now accommodates up to 408 detainees, all of whom are single men. It has limitations in design, but detainees enjoy freedom of movement during the day. Indeed, the amount of open space provided is acknowledged by the chief inspector of prisons to be a real asset for them.

In 2008, when for some time the centre had been holding a mixture of detainees whose applications were under consideration and detainees whose applications had already failed, my predecessor decided to concentrate services for new applicants under the detained fast-track process at Harmondsworth removal centre. That decision not only created a number of savings for the agency, but gave detainees access to the benefits of the legal services and advice provided at Harmondsworth. As a consequence, Oakington is now predominantly used to hold individuals whose immigration applications have been refused by both the UK Border Agency and, where appropriate, the independent courts. We detain individuals in that centre for removal only after they have been given every opportunity to leave the UK voluntarily but have failed to do so, when we need to establish identity, or because they are to be deported. The expectation of the agency is that it is a removal centre, and that should be the expectation of detainees as well.

I genuinely welcome the independent scrutiny to which our immigration removal centres are subjected both by the independent monitoring boards, which my hon. Friend mentioned and which operate on a daily basis in all the centres, and by Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons, whose team makes periodic visits on an announced and unannounced basis. The insight and commentary from both those organisations cause the UK Border Agency and its contractors to review their policies and procedures continually to ensure that removal centres are operated safely, that they meet the standards laid down by the 2001 detention centre rules and associated operating standards, and that detainees are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

According to the report that followed the visit of the inspectorate in June 2008, Oakington had a number of positive attributes—notably a dramatic reduction in the number of escapes, efficient and friendly reception procedures, a good standard of health care provision, good pastoral and practical welfare support for detainees, and improved recreational facilities. However, the inspectorate also found that detainees' perceptions of safety and security had been reduced, that immigration advice was limited—that was mentioned by my hon. Friend—and that the local UK Border Agency team lacked experience.

It is perhaps not surprising that the number of detainees who felt unsafe at Oakington had increased since the inspectorate's previous visit, in view of the significant shift from holding individuals whose applications to remain in the UK were still under consideration to holding those who were about to be removed. I imagine that people who have travelled halfway around the world to start a new life in the UK are bound to feel uncertain about what their future holds when their applications to stay have failed and they are being sent back to their own countries.

It is of course disappointing for me, and for my officials, if the inspectorate found that detainees did not feel that they were treated with dignity and respect by staff. That is not the experience of the on-site UK Border Agency contract monitor and her staff, who recognise that the staff deal with some very difficult situations in a centre whose open layout means that particular skill and expertise are required for the maintaining of a safe and secure environment.

Ms Abbott: I met the contract manager during my visit, and it seemed to me that she was in collusion with the staff. It was "Hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil".

Mr. Woolas: I am sorry if my hon. Friend believes that to be the case, but I think that my earlier observation is pertinent. As she acknowledged, the facility operates in difficult circumstances. However, I do not wish to deflect her criticism. I think that it is right that my hon. Friend raises her concerns, and I commend her for doing so. She said at the outset that there was no electoral advantage for her in doing so; she is doing the right thing and I accept the integrity with which she is doing it. That is why I take this Adjournment debate especially seriously, and I must measure the comments she and other Members have made against the advice I am given in forming judgments, particularly as to the future.

I think it is fair to say that the points that have been made not only in reports but more generally over the past months have been listened to carefully. I am thinking particularly of the report from the inspectorate, however. As a result, there have been a number of significant improvements at the centre. They include the introduction of a dedicated induction unit which allows all those who have just arrived to be located together while they settle into the routine of the centre; and the introduction of an information leaflet for detainees which is given to them on arrival. It is published in 11 languages and sets out expectations about why they are detained, the role of the local UKBA team and how to access its services, how to seek independent legal advice—I note my hon. Friend's point on that, and I shall look into it—the role of the independent monitoring board and how to raise grievances and complaints.

Every detainee is seen on arrival by a team especially dedicated to that, and it is available thereafter upon request to answer questions about individual cases. That team is led by an experienced manager who has worked at the centre for a number of years. There has also been the introduction of regular surgery visits by the criminal casework directorate to accelerate the process of deporting ex-foreign national prisoners. There is also a revised and simpler complaints system with guidance to detainees on how to complain and how they can expect their grievances to be handled. A new library provides enhanced services in a far larger and more comfortable environment for residents. The relocation of the health care centre inside the perimeter makes it far more accessible to detainees. A far larger and better equipped fitness suite has also been provided.

I recognise that the continued uncertainty surrounding the future of Oakington may have left the inspectorate with the impression that the centre had "lost its way" and that it has not experienced the same levels of investment as other centres over the past few years.

[Mr. Woolas]

However, the UKBA has sought to resolve this matter and has been in discussion with the Homes and Communities Agency, Oakington's landowner, for some time about its future in light of recent decisions to grant planning permission for a new centre at Bullingdon in Oxfordshire and at Bedford.

Following those discussions, a decision has recently been taken that Oakington will close within the next two years. The UKBA is currently considering a number of options in preparation for that closure, and a decision will be reached shortly as to when it is likely to occur. However, that will not stop the agency continuing to invest in the centre in the interests of maintaining a safe and secure environment for both detainees and staff.

In respect of that point, I thank my hon. Friend. When it is known that a centre is to shut, it is—perhaps—human nature to allow it to wind down. We will not allow that to happen; we will ensure as best we can that standards are maintained and resources are expended to ensure that. Improvements and upgrades in the services and facilities provided will continue throughout this year, which will directly benefit the detainees. They will include: refurbished sanitary ware; a larger and enhanced arts and craft room; an operating standard for welfare services; and more information for detainees to help prepare them for removal.

To conclude, Oakington is not an easy centre to operate in view of both its layout—the original design—and, as I have acknowledged, the fact that it will close within the next two years. However, having looked at the report, the advice available to me and the correspondence from hon. Members, I am satisfied that it provides a satisfactory level of service to detainees, especially bearing in mind the response that the agency has had to the inspectorate's report. The vast majority of detainees stay for only a matter of a few weeks. My hon. Friend spoke about speeding up the system. Of course, nobody knows better than I the desirability of that, but there is not the time to go into the legal reasons why delays occur. The level of care and commitment provided by the staff is high, as has been acknowledged by the independent monitoring board.

I give the commitment to the House to examine the additional specific points that my hon. Friend has raised from her visit and to ensure that Members are given the information that they desire to satisfy themselves that a proper process and proper facilities are available at Oakington and the UKBA's other facilities—

10.46 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.9(7)).

House of Commons

Tuesday 9 June 2009

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Savings

2. **Bob Spink** (Castle Point) (Ind): What his most recent estimate is of the percentage of household disposable income that is saved. [278505]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kitty Ussher): The latest gross household savings ratio is for the fourth quarter of 2008 and it shows that 4.8 per cent. of total household resources were saved.

Bob Spink: Families saving for the future are under serious pressure, especially those with disabled children, as they come under particular pressure when the disabled child reaches 18, so saving is very important for them. What have the Government done to help those families? I ask that because some good Government initiatives that were introduced in the Budget seem to have got lost in the general credit crunch debate.

Kitty Ussher: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this point, because the Government announced in this year's Budget that we will contribute an additional £100 a year to the child trust fund accounts of all disabled children, with the most severely disabled receiving £200. We are doing that because, as he mentioned, we recognise the particular issues that face disabled children as they reach maturity. They can, of course, control their trust fund assets when they turn 18.

John McFall (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab/Co-op): There will certainly be a reduction in savings from household income in the Cheltenham and Gloucester area today, following the peremptory announcement by Lloyds of the loss of 1,600 Cheltenham & Gloucester jobs. Is it not the case that Lloyds has betrayed any regard for the dignity of people and their employment, and will the Minister join me in writing to the Cheltenham & Gloucester in order to ensure that people who are to be made unemployed are treated properly?

Kitty Ussher: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this point, and we obviously hope that people will be treated with decency in what is a very difficult time, not only for Lloyds but across the financial services sector. The question of the number of people employed by Lloyds is obviously a commercial matter for the company itself, but I am sure that Members in all parts of the House who have constituents who are affected will want to make sure that they are treated as decently as possible.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): How can the Treasury properly promote a savings culture when it is led by a Chancellor who last week was scheduled to be sacked? [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is he?"] If the Prime Minister does not have any confidence in the head of the Treasury, why should the rest of us?

Kitty Ussher: Well, I am delighted to be able to report to the House that the Chancellor is currently at ECOFIN fighting for this Government's interests, and in particular ensuring that the UK's interests are represented as the European Community discusses the de Larosière report, which is entirely relevant to the City of London as it deals with the European supervisory framework. I think that that is exactly the right thing for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to be doing, and it is in direct contrast to the policies of the Opposition, which are to reduce the influence of our country in Europe by leaving the European People's party and refusing to engage.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend back to the Treasury; it is nice to see her in the team again.

As my hon. Friend will know, the savings ratio tends to be geared to what is happening to house prices, so it is no surprise that now that we are seeing a house price deflation there is a recovery in household savings. At a time of low inflation, savers will be looking for good deals, and I welcome the extension of the individual savings account scheme in the Budget and particularly the extension of savings opportunities for those over 50. Will she and the Treasury team continue to look at some targeted further developments of the ISA scheme to assist those who are now seeking to save in new ways?

Kitty Ussher: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to this point. People over 50 will be able to save £10,200 in their ISA from October this year, of which £5,100 can be saved in cash. We know that this will be particularly welcome as savers seek better returns on their assets. It is, of course, a competitive market out there, so I urge anybody who has been adversely affected by the necessary reduction in interest rates to have a look at the comparator tables available on the Financial Services Authority website.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Can the Minister tell me why anyone should save at this time, bearing in mind that the return they get on any savings is either nil or minimal? Is she not concerned, as I and many other Members on both sides of the House are, about the situation of the elderly, who look to the income from their savings to provide them with a sensible standard of living? What are the Government doing about those who rely to a large extent on their savings to supplement any pension or other modest or low income?

Kitty Ussher: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening, but I just explained one thing that we are doing for the over-50s to ensure that they can get a

better return on their savings—we have increased the limits up to which they can save tax-free in ISAs. This Government's policy is to promote saving across the whole of a person's lifetime, which is why we introduced child trust funds—I am delighted that three quarters of parents take those up for their children; we, of course, open them for the remaining quarter. It is also why we introduced and are expanding the ISA allowances, why the savings gateway will come on board from next year and why we continue to give advantageous tax relief to people saving for their pensions.

Bradford & Bingley (Bonds)

3. **Mr. Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What representations United Kingdom Financial Investments has received on the cessation of interest payments on Bradford & Bingley's 11.625 per cent. perpetual subordinated bonds. [278506]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): The Treasury and UKFI receive a wide range of representations on issues relating to banks in receipt of public funds. It is not the Government's practice to provide details of all such representations.

Mr. Hollobone: Bradford & Bingley has announced that it is going to default on the interest payments on these bonds. When it made that announcement the capital value of the bonds fell, so many people who have invested in these securities for their retirement income have lost out on both interest and capital. Given that Bradford & Bingley is effectively a Government-owned institution, does this not suggest that the Government are prioritising getting their money back ahead of their moral and legal obligation to bondholders?

Ian Pearson: This was a decision for the Bradford & Bingley board to make, judged against the objectives it had in its business plan. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the statutory debt owed to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme is about £14 billion, and the Treasury is owed about £4 billion. He will also be aware of the normal creditor hierarchy, and I believe that it is fair that the FSCS and the Treasury should be repaid ahead of subordinated liabilities. Furthermore, he will be aware that in such circumstances the 11.625 per cent. rate of interest should have given people who were taking advantage of these bonds some sort of clue that they were making a reasonably risky investment and that they would not necessarily be ahead of others who were making less risky investments.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh, North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, we saw that Lloyds TSB was able to pay back to the taxpayer a net £2.3 billion, and the British Bankers Association today reports that bank lending to small businesses has increased over the past month. Although there is a long way to go, what do those developments tell us about the effectiveness of the Government's strategy towards the banks?

Ian Pearson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the announcement made yesterday by Lloyds Banking Group. I think that it indicates that the recapitalisation of the banks and the actions that we took in January, on top of those in October, are working. We need to do more to continue to ensure that lending is available in the financial system, be it lending for people who want mortgages or lending to business, which is vital. Well over £50 billion of additional lending has been committed this year, which should make a difference in the future. The Government need to keep taking actions that will make a real difference in helping people and businesses through these difficult economic times, rather than leave people to their own devices, as the Conservative party would do.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that he is about to appoint a valuer for the assets in Bradford & Bingley and that the valuer will be able to act with complete independence from the views of Ministers in valuing those assets? Can he also confirm that the valuer will be free to offer the same deal to bondholders and shareholders in Bradford & Bingley as the preferential deal offered to the same groups of people in respect of Northern Rock?

Ian Pearson: I can indeed confirm that the Government will appoint a valuer shortly. We hope to be able to do that before the recess, and a public appointments process is going on at the moment. The hon. Lady will be aware of the powers in the Banking Act 2009 and the role of the valuer—they have a remit to act independently. The valuer's decisions will undoubtedly be a matter for the valuer, acting in accordance with his or her remit and existing legislation.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry, North-West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the development at Lloyds. May I ask him to look further at the form of recapitalisation executed there—namely the reduction in high interest rate preference shares for normal equity—to see whether or not he could consider, in the case of Bradford & Bingley and others, using high-yielding bonds too? They could be repaid and therefore make it much easier, in terms of bank liquidity, to promote the very increase in borrowing that we seek.

Ian Pearson: My hon. Friend has a great deal of expertise in these matters, and I always listen with interest to what he says. Lloyds has made a commercial decision about wanting to repay the preference shares, and it is right to refer to the vital importance of liquidity in the financial system. As always, the Government will keep these matters under review.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) (Con): Does the Minister accept that it is essential that United Kingdom Financial Investments should be seen to have genuine operational independence? Will the Government therefore take early action to put that body on a proper statutory footing?

Ian Pearson: We have made a number of announcements with regard to UKFI, and as the hon. Gentleman knows, it operates on an arm's length basis. It is right that Bradford & Bingley and other banks that have received Government funds and involve UKFI in a supervisory management role should act on a commercial basis. We will continue to ensure that we provide the right level of resourcing for UKFI so that it can undertake the work that it needs to do, which is about protecting the taxpayer's interests.

We have to bear in mind the fact that as a Government, we have invested huge sums on behalf of the taxpayer in our banking system. We need to ensure that we do all we can to protect the taxpayer's interests, and that is what we will do.

Inflation

4. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North) (Lab): What his most recent assessment is of the effect of inflation on the economy. [278507]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): The Treasury's latest assessment of inflation and its effect, and the effect of other factors on the economy, was published in the Budget. Since then, consumer price inflation was 2.3 per cent. in April.

Ms Keeble: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post.

In the longer term, will the Government look again at the inflation target, perhaps with a view to raising it so that as the economy moves out of recession—it is doing that, which is very welcome—the green shoots of recovery are not crushed by too early and too steep an increase in interest rates?

Mr. Byrne: We certainly have no plans to choke off growth when it returns, which is exactly why we have put so many tools and resources in place to ensure that we return to recovery as quickly as possible. The reason why we will not revisit the inflation target in future is simple: we do not see that there is a trade-off between inflation and growth, and in the medium term we believe that higher inflation will deliver higher interest rates, which in turn will dampen down our long-term rate of growth. That is exactly why, when the Chancellor published the Budget a month or two ago, he confirmed the Bank's remit to keep the inflation target exactly where it is.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I had intended to congratulate the Chancellor on rising from his grave, but it appears that he is still lurking in the graveyard.

May I ask when the Treasury plans to reverse the not very successful quantitative easing programme, in order to moderate inflationary expectations?

Mr. Byrne: The Governor of the Bank of England has been very clear that quantitative easing is a tool that he needs to ensure that monetary policy operates effectively in this country. That is perhaps why we have not seen the falls in prices that have been seen in other parts of the world. We are absolutely determined to ensure that the Governor has the tools that he needs to set that measure alongside a fiscal stimulus. Together, they amount to something like 4 per cent. of the economy. We believe that that is the best way to return to growth as quickly as possible.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): The market is factoring in expectations of a significant rise in inflation, as reflected in higher bond yields. Why is that happening, and does it not run the risk of choking off any economic recovery when it comes?

Mr. Byrne: That is exactly why the Chancellor has been clear that the inflation-busting remit of the Governor of the Bank of England remains undisturbed. What is important is that the Chancellor makes available to the Governor the tools that he needs to deliver on that inflation target. That is why it is important that it is down to the independent Monetary Policy Committee to help oversee how tools such as quantitative easing are used.

The Governor has been clear about how he will approach the question of when to stop using the tools that have been made available to him. He said in the May inflation report that that decision would be based on a judgment about the inflation outlook, so there is no change in the strategy or the approach. This is simply another way of conducting monetary policy within the framework that the Chancellor has set for him.

Mr. Greg Hands (Hammersmith and Fulham) (Con): May I, too, welcome the Chief Secretary to his new position?

Last week in Beijing, US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner said that

"consumer spending in the United States will be restrained for some time relative to what is typically the case in recoveries. These are necessary adjustments. They will entail a longer, slower process of recovery".

Going into this recession, UK household debt was even higher than that in the US, so why does the Chief Secretary think that the UK recovery will be so much stronger than that in the US and is he still sticking to his trampoline forecast of 3.5 per cent. growth in 2011?

Mr. Byrne: The reason why we have confidence in the forecast is that we not only acted early, but acted to ensure that a considerable stimulus was put in place. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the return to growth after previous recessions in the 1980s and 1990s, he will see that it was not dissimilar to the return to growth that we project in the years to come. But that growth would not materialise and we would not see the recovery that we project if we followed the course of action proposed by the Opposition, and took £5 billion out of the economy at the worst possible time.

Like me, the hon. Gentleman will have read closely the speech made by the shadow Chancellor, who said this morning:

"You might think that the middle of a recession is not the time to be investing in the businesses and entrepreneurs of the future, but you couldn't be more wrong. It's actually exactly the right time."

Can the hon. Gentleman perhaps explain why he plans to take £5 billion out of the economy in the middle of a recession?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Notwithstanding the progress that has been made arising from the G20 and all the rest of it—*[Interruption.]* This is serious—*[Interruption.]* We won every seat in Bolsover last week, six out of six—*[Interruption.]* Not in my area. I was on the streets speaking to voters and getting them out—*[Interruption.]* You are no good at maths, either.

Will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that this time last year there was serious speculation in oil and other commodities, and the price of oil rose to $147 a

barrel? Speculation undoubtedly played a significant part in that. The price has now risen to $68 today. Will he ensure that there is no speculation of the kind that we had last year, to ensure that the recovery gathers pace through to next year?

Mr. Byrne: As my hon. Friend will know, the Governor of the Bank of England and the Chancellor, in the Budget, projected that the consumer prices index would begin to fall over the course of this year, which is why it is important that we ensure that the Governor has the right tools at his disposal to ensure that we do not see prices falling uncontrollably and for an extended length of time. We will therefore ensure that the Governor has the tools that he says he needs, but we will need to keep situations such as the rise in oil prices under close review. That is why it is important that we retain a degree of flexibility. It is also why it will be important for us to carry on acting internationally, because the kind of co-ordination that my hon. Friend mentions is best done internationally. That is something that would be very difficult if we were to take the very different approach proposed by the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker: I call Mr. Field. I thought that you wanted to ask a question.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I often want to intervene, although not particularly on this point; the question that I was going to ask concerns something that arose some time ago. What level of quantitative easing does the Chief Secretary believe is consistent with a low inflation target?

Mr. Byrne: Well, I am afraid that that is a judgment that we will leave to the Governor of the Bank of England. The Chancellor has authorised up to £150 billion of quantitative easing, and the Bank has drawn down something like £125 billion so far. As I say, it is important that we provide the framework and give the Governor the tools to do the job, but it is also important for the confidence of markets and for delivering the target in hand that it is left to the MPC and the Governor to make the ultimate judgment about how much is needed now and how much is needed later.

Reoffending (Access to Services)

5. **Alun Michael** (Cardiff, South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues to ensure that methods of budgeting for health, education and skills enable quick and effective access to services required to reduce levels of reoffending. [278508]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): The Treasury sits alongside 13 other Departments, including the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health, in our work focused on reducing reoffending. My right hon. Friend will be glad to know that adult reoffending fell by 23 per cent. between 2000 and 2006, while juvenile reoffending fell by nearly 19 per cent. over the same period.

Alun Michael: I welcome my right hon. Friend to answering these questions.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that spending on aspects such as drug treatment and public health can have an implication for reoffending? For instance, the engagement of young people in school and in having a future through education is also relevant to reducing reoffending. Will he come with me to look at the success of the violence reduction strategy in Cardiff, which has prevented violent crime and also reduced the need for expensive surgery? Will he also ensure that officials in his Department make the connection between these different sorts of budgets?

Mr. Byrne: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the persistence and tenacity with which he has raised this issue with Treasury Ministers. I would be pleased to learn a little more about the work in Cardiff that he has talked about. It is a clear example of the way in which front-line public servants, when they are given greater freedom, can work together more effectively to deliver better outcomes on such an important agenda, very often for less money. I know that he will be keen to know more about the work of Sir Michael Bichard, who is working in 13 different areas around the country to consider how, within different local authority areas, we can bring together the work of public services engaged in similar endeavours.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon) (Con): Is this not an area where the Minister can bring to bear experience from his previous office? Is it not something that Governments of all colours are rather bad at—namely, spending on prevention rather than cure and spending upstream to avoid a problem rather than spending money on the consequences of that problem? Could not the excellent third sector organisations be deployed far more efficiently by the Government, with the right kind of backing, to stop people reoffending as frequently as they do?

Mr. Byrne: I have to agree with the hon. Gentleman. Moving our attention and our resources into the business of prevention will, overall, be much cheaper for the country and will save a lot of human pain in the medium and long term. I must agree with him that the third sector provides extraordinary new potential, as do charities, voluntary groups and social enterprises. They can help on this agenda in two fields in particular. First, they can ensure that those who are convicted of offences are given much greater skills, education and literacy training so that they are better able to succeed in the labour market. Secondly, they can do a better job of helping people to kick the poison of drugs. As we know, that is the root cause of so much reoffending in this country.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): One of the most effective approaches with young offenders in particular is finding paid employment. I have seen a scheme sponsored by National Grid that reduces the reoffending rates from 70 per cent. to just 7 per cent. through supported employment, taking young people into the workplace and ensuring that they have all the support they need. As has been said, this is all about prevention and ensuring that we invest in the long term by investing these moneys up front. Will he commit to ensuring that such schemes are replicated across the country so that we learn from the best practice that is already happening up and down our Prison Service?

Mr. Byrne: The scheme that my hon. Friend mentions is very much the kind of scheme that will be more possible in the future because of the £100 million of investment provided last year in the youth crime action plan. As I say, ensuring that money and resources go into equipping people with the skills that they need to succeed in today's labour market is one of the best investments that we can make in crime prevention. From my experience in my constituency, I think that that must go alongside well-organised, well-structured and well-delivered programmes to keep people away from drugs, too, but where there is innovation such as that pioneered by National Grid, we will, of course, seek to learn from it and build on it.

Debt Reduction

6. **Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South) (Con): What recent discussions officials in his Department have had with the International Monetary Fund on the Government's plans for debt reduction. [278509]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): The IMF holds bilateral discussions with each of its member countries, usually every year, as part of its country surveillance function. IMF staff last visited London in May 2009 and met representatives of various institutions, including Her Majesty's Treasury.

Richard Ottaway: The IMF recently published its report on the British economy and the Minister's colleagues have clearly read it, as they are very fond of quoting the odd phrase that supports the Government's tattered economic policy. However, at its heart it is highly critical and calls for a

"more ambitious medium-term fiscal adjustment path".

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that is bureaucratic code for, "We're in a mess and the Budget doesn't sort it out"?

Mr. Byrne: I am afraid that I am going to be guilty of quoting from aspects of the IMF report again, but like me the hon. Gentleman will have read the IMF's endorsement of the Government's response to the crisis. It said that it was "bold and wide ranging" and would "support the recovery"—an echo of what IMF managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn said when he told "Newsnight" that it was "obvious" that the fiscal stimulus

"is the right thing to do".

However, there will be differences of view with the IMF. For example, we have a different projection or estimate of what the return to growth will look like; the IMF estimates that economic growth will contract by 4.1 per cent. this year, but the consensus among independent forecasters is for something more akin to 3.8 per cent. It is not unexpected, therefore, that we will have different ideas and judgments about what is the right pathway back to fiscal balance. We are determined to make sure that we halve the deficit over four years and pay off something of the order of £50 billion by 2013-14. Where there are difficult decisions to make, we will make them, especially on tax and efficiency. Unlike the Opposition, however, we are determined to make sure that we protect front-line services because we think that that is the best way to protect businesses and families in this country while returning as quickly as possible to a sensible and sustainable fiscal position.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): The economies of some European economies, such as Hungary and Latvia, are experiencing deep economic troubles, and traditionally they would turn to the IMF for help and rescue. They are also committed to becoming members of the eurozone, so is the Treasury having any discussions with the IMF on how to co-ordinate the actions of the IMF and the European Commission in respect of those failing currencies?

Mr. Byrne: As my hon. Friend knows, conversations about such questions go on all the time with the IMF and within the European Commission. She underlines the point that we need a better system of international surveillance so that preventive action, where it is needed, can be taken fast.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary confirm that this country is now formally in an excessive deficit procedure, and that the Economic and Finance Council wrote to the Chancellor on 27 April to say that the Government had not taken effective action to correct the situation? ECOFIN also said that, even on the Government's own figures, our deficit will be more than four times the permitted 3 per cent. level. Is the Minister pleased or sad that that rules out this country joining the euro in the foreseeable future?

Mr. Byrne: I missed the last bit, but the answer to the substance of the question is that we have to make sure that we publish a pathway back to balance that is open, transparent and credible. It will entail the difficult policy choices that were set out very clearly in the Budget. Difficult decisions will have to be taken, such as increasing marginal rates of tax on the 600,000 people who earn more than £150,000 a year. Serious efficiency measures will also be needed, but as my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary said recently, that is precisely the sort of discipline that we are determined to set out, and stick to.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Since debt reduction is of the utmost importance to developing countries, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government remain absolutely committed to achieving the millennium development goals?

Mr. Byrne: Yes, I am happy to provide my right hon. Friend and the House with that assurance.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk) (Con): Given the way our debts are growing, is the right hon. Gentleman aware that according to *The Economist*, our Budget deficit this year as a percentage of GDP will be the highest in the entire industrialised world?

Mr. Byrne: The very reason we are able to mount the fiscal stimulus that we put in place this year is that, against international comparisons, we went into the downturn with relatively low levels of debt. We think it is important that we invest now, because if we did not provide the stimulus that we are putting in place, the recession would cut deeper and longer, and would more closely resemble the kind of experience that this country went through in the 1980s and 1990s. That is not an experience, thanks very much, that we want to repeat.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet) (Lab): I do not know where *The Economist* got its figures, but the IMF figures indicate that debt in this country as a percentage of GDP is lower than in all our industrial competitors and will stay lower than theirs for several years. Is not the key thing about debt whether or not we can service it? As we reduce those levels of debt, may I ask my right hon. Friend not to cut the investments that we are making in jobs, wealth creation and public services, because those are what will guarantee that we can repay the debt in the long term?

Mr. Byrne: I can provide that assurance because in the Budget the Chancellor was able to set out a pathway back to balance, which involved difficult decisions on tax, spending and efficiencies, not least adding to the £30 billion of efficiencies projected for next year a further £5 billion. The Chancellor was also able to set out the kind of sustained investment that we can continue this year, for example, in primary care trusts, with budgets up 5.5 per cent., in schools, with budgets up this year 4.3 per cent., in front-line policing, with budgets up this year 2.7 per cent., and in local councils, which this year helped to deliver the lowest council tax increases for more than a decade.

Mr. David Gauke (South-West Hertfordshire) (Con): May I welcome the Chief Secretary to his new position? I am sure his arrival in his new post will be welcomed by the Chancellor as well, not least on the grounds that, presumably, the Chief Secretary's spouse will not be plotting to replace the Chancellor. The IMF report that we have been discussing says that the UK recovery will be subdued and gradual, in contrast to the Treasury's very optimistic forecasts, yet is was reported in *The Times* last week that even the Treasury's projections were insufficient for the Prime Minister, and

"the Prime Minister tried to upgrade the growth forecasts to make the economic outlook appear rosier than it was; the Chancellor refused."

Is there any truth in this allegation? Is this not another example of splits between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor?

Mr. Byrne: What are important for the House are the estimates that were published. There is indeed a range of views right the way across independent forecasters. The hon. Gentleman will no doubt have access to those, as I do. The IMF, it is true, is on the pessimistic end of those forecasts, projecting a 4.1 per cent. contraction this year. I understand that the IMF has now revised its forecast three times since October last year, reflecting a degree of uncertainty in the international economy, but I merely note for the House that the IMF is at the pessimistic end of that range of forecasts. If one corrals the range of independent forecasts that are available, one finds the consensus among them is about 3.8 per cent. We think growth will be stronger than that but, as the Chancellor has said to the House a number of times, the international economy remains in an uncertain place.

Early Intervention

7. **Mr. Graham Allen** (Nottingham, North) (Lab): If he will take steps to ensure that policy to encourage early intervention is taken into account in decisions on expenditure in the next comprehensive spending review; and if he will make a statement. [278510]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work on early intervention. Its benefits have been recognised in spending decisions and, for example, in January's "New Opportunities" White Paper, as my hon. Friend knows, and they will certainly be recognised, as he calls for, in future spending decisions as well.

Mr. Allen: Will my right hon. Friend have a word with the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury and congratulate him on now being a little closer to the place where he can actually do something about social inclusion and early intervention? Will he also discuss with him the idea that the best way to pay off debt is to invest effectively and early, securing returns through people who have grown up to be more capable citizens due to early intervention? Will he therefore include early intervention, as the next theme of the comprehensive spending review, in every single Department so that we can start to receive repayments from that investment, to pay off the debt and to establish an effective economic base among our people as well as among our financial institutions?

Mr. Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the benefits of investing particularly in the early years of children's lives. Sure Start children's centres are a great example: we have invested almost £2 billion in them, and we will have 3,500 of them by the end of next year. It is absolutely right to say that that investment in children's earliest years will amply be repaid in years to come. Future spending will not be needed because children will be better equipped for their future lives—transforming their chances. I can tell my hon. Friend that we certainly will reflect that perspective in the comprehensive spending review, when that work is under way. It would be catastrophic to impose £5 billion of unplanned spending cuts this year, as the Opposition have argued for.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): Early intervention is welcome, but how does the Minister expect to cope with the lack of social and language skills of many pupils entering reception classes and the first years of primary school, which reflect the breakdown generally in British society?

Mr. Timms: Of course, the hon. Lady's point is one reason why early intervention is so important. The network of 3,500 children's centres will make a big contribution to preparing children at the start of their lives to do well, and for school when they reach it. It is vital that those investments be maintained. One great benefit of the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) on that issue is the cross-party support for it. He wrote a pamphlet jointly with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), and we need to sustain that commitment.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): One issue that must be considered, along with early intervention, is poverty among families. The Government have a commitment to child poverty reduction targets, but unfortunately it has not been possible to implement them in recent years. We must stick with those targets, however, so will my right hon. Friend commit to keeping them as a priority and ensure that they are part of the comprehensive spending review next year?

Mr. Timms: I certainly will. We have made a great deal of progress in reducing child poverty. The number of children below the poverty line has been reduced by half a million since 1997; our commitment is to secure the eradication of child poverty in the UK by 2020, and we will shortly publish legislation to enshrine that commitment in statute.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I realise why it was impossible up until last week for the Chancellor to confirm the details of the comprehensive spending review, but, since the Chancellor has now reasserted control of his Department, will the right hon. Gentleman, on the Chancellor's behalf, confirm that there will indeed be a comprehensive spending review? Will he also confirm the timing of that review and the period that it will cover?

Mr. Timms: An announcement of the timing of the comprehensive spending review has not yet been made, and I am not able to provide additional information on that, but of course there will certainly be one.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) (Lab): In the spending review, will the Government take into account the impact of oil prices, particularly on businesses and communities, which have great difficulties with them?

Mr. Timms: Yes, we certainly will. We have put in place an effective programme of support for businesses, which need help to get through this very difficult period in the world economy. We are starting to see clear signs that the steps we have taken are working, and we will maintain our support for businesses in the period ahead.

Public Sector Debt

8. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): By what date he next expects public sector debt to fall below 40 per cent. of gross domestic product. [278511]

10. **Mr. Brooks Newmark** (Braintree) (Con): By what date he next expects public sector debt to fall below 40 per cent. of gross domestic product. [278513]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): In the current global environment of uncertainty, our focus is on ensuring that debt is on a downward turn in the medium term, and we have set out clear plans to do precisely that.

Andrew Selous: Does the Minister accept that the huge increase in Government debt in the UK represents significant extra tax rises for the British people in the future, and that the interest on that debt also represents massive amounts of public spending forgone in future years?

Mr. Byrne: We have been very clear about what precisely we project and anticipate in the years to come. We have been candid and open about the tax and spending implications, and the efficiency implications. I know the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I tell him that the future costs of today's downturn would be far more significant if we let it cut deeper and longer, and taking £5 billion out of public spending right now would guarantee exactly that.

Mr. Newmark: I am sure the Minister is aware that on-balance-sheet debt is likely to rise to 79 per cent. of gross domestic product by 2013-14. I am sure he is well aware that, the Government having acquired several banks, that debt amounts to roughly £2 trillion, currently held off-balance sheet, in addition to another £1 trillion of public sector pension liabilities. Can he confirm how much debt is currently held off-balance sheet by the Government, and what percentage of GDP that represents?

Mr. Byrne: We can be open about what the costs are of the current financial crisis, and those costs were set out clearly in the Budget. Both the International Monetary Fund and the Bank of England have welcomed the degree of transparency about the kind of costs we have projected.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): When calculating public sector debt, can my right hon. Friend assure me that the whole cost of private finance initiative schemes will be included? He talks of transparency; we need transparency in relation to PFI, which is at best a murky scheme, and at worst a failed scheme.

Mr. Byrne: I know that I will not be the first Minister to answer that question by reminding the House that that is of course a matter for the Office for National Statistics.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend reflect on what the alternatives might have been if we had not intervened in the banking system? My constituents—pensioners with savings, and people with mortgages and businesses—are relieved that the Government have taken the action that they have taken. Complaints from Conservative Members about the level of debt that that has given rise to demonstrate that they would have done absolutely nothing to assist those people, or to deal with the dire consequences that people would have faced as a result.

Mr. Byrne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I would tempt him to go further. Of course, if the rescue for the banks had not taken place, not only would the economy be in a far more serious situation now, but its potential for growth would be in a far more serious position. That, in part, is precisely why the IMF has congratulated the Government on the bold and wide-ranging programme we have put in place, and indeed on the international leadership we have shown.

Topical Questions

T1. [278528] **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Liam Byrne): We will bring forward a statement of departmental responsibilities to the House at the earliest possible opportunity.

Ms Keeble: Perhaps like many other hon. Members in this House, I have a branch of Cheltenham & Gloucester in my town. May I put it to my right hon. Friend that many people will be really concerned about the loss of jobs and services from institutions that have had so

much public sector funding? Will he therefore ensure that the banks understand that although of course we expect them to make a profit and repay their debts, we also expect them to honour their wider social commitments to their employees, their customers and the wider community?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): I fully understand the comments that my hon. Friend makes. She will be aware that Lloyds Banking Group is undertaking a restructuring exercise. To be frank, in some instances it does not make sense to have three branches of the same bank within 100 yd of each other. That having been said, it is vital that Lloyds Banking Group follows the right sort of processes, and that it treats not only its customers but its staff fairly. Although we are talking about an operational decision for Lloyds, Lloyds has made it clear that it intends, as a matter of preference, to try to carry out its proposals through natural turnover of its staff, and we hope that it will be possible to do that.

Mr. Speaker: Order. In case there is a problem, I should say that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury opened by saying what great things his Department was doing. It would appear, however, that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury knew more about this particular subject.

Mr. George Osborne (Tatton) (Con): I know he got off to a shaky start, but let me welcome the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury to his job. He is the fifth Chief Secretary I have faced—and hopefully the last before the general election. I hope he enjoys his move from No. 10 to the Treasury, and that the coffee is up to his exacting standards. At least he knows he will not be hit on the head by a flying mobile phone.

Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the Treasury's current spending plans—the plans set out by the Treasury at the Budget—show that total real Government spending is going to be cut in the years 2011, 2012 and 2013? If that is the case, what on earth was the Prime Minister saying when he told the press conference last Friday:

"Public spending is due to rise every year"?

Mr. Byrne: I thank the shadow Chancellor for that welcome, delivered with the self-assurance and charm that have become his trademark in the House. As he very well knows, when the Chancellor set out his Budget he provided for 0.7 per cent. real-terms increases in current spending. That is set alongside a move in public service net investment to 1.25 per cent. That was the position the Prime Minister was echoing last week.

Mr. Osborne: I am sorry, but I must press the Chief Secretary on this. He gave us the current spending figures; I am asking about total Government spending, which is what the Prime Minister was asked about. The Treasury figures clearly show that that is going to be cut in 2011, 2012 and 2013. That is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer said on the radio, the day after the Budget, that he had cut overall spending. What on earth did the Prime Minister mean when he said that public spending was due to rise every year?

Mr. Byrne: The position is as I have just stated. There will be real growth in public spending of 0.7 per cent. between 2011-12 and 2013-14, alongside a situation in which public sector net investment moves to a position of 1.25 per cent. by 2013-14. *[Interruption.]* I hear Opposition Members squealing "Cut" from a sedentary position. However, through our process of bringing forward capital investment into this year, we are indeed able to provide for reductions in capital spending in later years. What the Prime Minister was reflecting is very clearly the position in current spending as was set out by the Chancellor at the Budget.

T2. [278529] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The prevailing economic philosophy is that the free movement of labour across Europe is good for the economy. Does the Chief Secretary agree with me that his Department needs to provide statistics to demonstrate whether a worker permanently resident in this country who gets a job has a greater economic multiplier effect than a temporarily resident migrant worker who gets the same job?

Mr. Byrne: That subject has been debated extensively in both Houses and it was reviewed in some depth by the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee. In their evidence submitted to that Committee, the Government were clear that, on average, migrant workers contribute more to this country than they take out. Obviously, it is important to keep that under close review. The advent of the Australian points-based system means that we are able either to raise or lower the bar to newcomers much more flexibly, depending on the needs of the labour market here and the overall economic contribution made to this country by migration.

Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) apologises for being unavoidably absent owing to a recent operation on his appendix. As the Chief Secretary surveys the team in his new Department, can he think of any part of the Treasury ministerial anatomy that, similarly, serves no useful function, exists in a state of constant pain and was threatened with brutal surgical removal over the weekend?

Mr. Byrne: None springs immediately to mind.

Mr. David Clelland (Tyne Bridge) (Lab): Ministers will be aware that this week is carers week. Could the appropriate Minister from the Treasury meet the appropriate Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions to try to find the finances to end the unfairness in the carer's allowance, which is completely lost following a very small increase in earnings or on retirement, despite the fact that the caring role and responsibility continue?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kitty Ussher): This being my first day as a Treasury Minister, having previously been at the Department for Work and Pensions, I can say I will be delighted to hold such a meeting.

T3. [278530] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What progress has the Chadwick review made on compensation for Equitable Life policyholders?

Ian Pearson: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Government appointed Sir John Chadwick to advise us on the form of an ex gratia payment scheme that should be devised and the factors that relate to disproportionate impact. I can report that Sir John

Chadwick has made progress; when I recently appeared before the Public Administration Committee, I gave further details about how his work was proceeding. I can confirm that actuarial advisers have been appointed to help him with his work, and that he has the staffing and resources he requires to do his job. We have always said that we wanted progress to be made as quickly as possible, and that clearly remains the Government's position.

Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (Lab): Last week, the Northern Ireland Secretary gave the House an undertaking that he would pursue with vigour the crisis facing investors in the Presbyterian Mutual Society in Northern Ireland. There is clearly a Treasury dimension to this. I would like to know what has been done, what is being done, and what discussions are being held on behalf of those investors—the most thrifty and decent people who are very anxious about having access to their funds now.

Ian Pearson: I sympathise with the situation that people who have made investments in the Presbyterian Mutual Society are facing. My hon. Friend will be aware that the PMS is not like a normal savings institution: it is not regulated by the Financial Services Authority, and when people made investments they did so in the form of shares rather than deposits. Different circumstances therefore apply. He will be aware that there has been an investigation. We have been looking into the whole issue of the regulation of credit unions and industrial and provident societies, and a report is due to be published shortly.

T4. [278531] **Andrew George** (St. Ives) (LD): In respect of the Government's planned changes to furnished holiday lettings tax rules, could the Financial Secretary to the Treasury clarify whether it would be possible to distinguish between properties that are purpose-built chalets, caravans, and other properties with occupancy restrictions that are clearly intended for the holiday lettings industry, and other properties that have been lived in and could be lived in again by local families in need?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I would not want to encourage the hon. Gentleman in the view that that might give a way forward on this issue. Our position is that we have given support in the past. It is clear, under European Union rules, that that support would need to be extended to furnished accommodation not only in the UK but across Europe. We are therefore making that change, but only for a year; then our intention would be to withdraw the relief altogether, not just for some but for all furnished holiday accommodation.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Further to earlier answers, Britain's national debt would be repaid more rapidly, and public expenditure cuts would be avoided more easily, if the top 700 British companies did not involve themselves in tax avoidance on such a grand scale. Why, in that case, does this year's Finance Bill repeal section 765 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988, which requires companies to seek the permission of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs before moving cash offshore and to say whether the move will be to the detriment of the Treasury? That will encourage avoidance.

Mr. Timms: I do not think it will. Indeed, we are likely to debate the matter in the Finance Committee this afternoon. The Treasury consents rules were introduced in 1951 in a very different environment and they are now clearly out of date. The measures that I will set out in Committee this afternoon, with which we are replacing those rules, are a much more effective way of tackling the genuine problem of avoidance, to which my hon. Friend rightly draws attention.

T5. [278532] **Mr. Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): The announcement today by Lloyds TSB about the job losses at Cheltenham & Gloucester is a big blow, particularly to the 74 people who will be made redundant in Gloucester. The bigger issue is the 1,000 people who also work in our county for the Cheltenham & Gloucester mortgage business. Given that the Government control a significant stake through UKFI—which the second permanent secretary to the Treasury runs, and which is therefore not at arm's length—can the Minister provide any assurance about whether those jobs are secure in the short and the long term?

Ian Pearson: As I have told the House previously, if we are to protect taxpayers' interests, it is vital that UKFI manages its relationships with the banks in which the Government have investments commercially. Lloyds Banking Group is making commercial decisions. As with any major company, we expect it to act in a socially responsible manner and undertake due processes of consultation with its work force. My understanding is that that is exactly what is happening.

T6. [278533] **John Barrett** (Edinburgh, West) (LD): Despite the massive investment of public funds in the banking sector, many small and medium-sized viable companies have contacted me to say that the banks are not providing the financial support that they require. What are the Chancellor and the Treasury team doing to ensure that money that goes to the banks finds its way to small and medium-sized businesses?

Ian Pearson: Let us first be clear that, when the Government took action to prevent the collapse in the banking system, we were investing not in the banks but in people who had savings and mortgages and in companies that had overdrafts in the banking system to ensure that it could continue. As a result of the negotiations in January, under the asset protection scheme, RBS has made legally binding commitments to invest more in businesses this year and next, as has Lloyds. The sums for businesses are £16 billion from RBS and £14 billion from Lloyds, on top of the additional investments that Northern Rock is making and the announcements from banks that have not taken advantage of the recapitalisation scheme, such as HSBC and Barclays.

We are in a position whereby much of the international finance that was available to the UK economy in the form of lending to business has disappeared in the past 12 months. We are putting that back in place through our negotiations and agreements with UK banks. We will continue to monitor, through the lending panel, actual lending in the UK economy, so that we can ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises and other businesses get the lending and financial support that they need to see them through the difficult times.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether my hon. Friend saw the survey in the *Financial Times* yesterday of City economists. It showed that a majority thought the recession would end in June. The minority who did not thought it would end sooner rather than later this year. Does that not show that the City is coming round to the Budget forecasts for the economy? Is that not a clear endorsement of the Government's programme for a fiscal stimulus?

Mr. Byrne: My hon. Friend will be delighted to hear that I have no plans to provide a running commentary on growth forecasts. The Budget clearly set out our current expectations, and the next update will be provided to the House in the pre-Budget report. I merely note that several City economists and independent forecasters have revised up their forecasts for growth next year and adjusted their forecasts for the extent of the downturn this year. As I said in response to earlier questions, independent forecasters' average for contraction this year is 3.8 per cent., which is much closer to the forecast that we published in the Budget.

T7. [278534] **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I ask Treasury Ministers to look again at the position of those families who are being pursued by the Treasury for alleged overpayment of tax credits? I still have a steady stream of families coming to my surgery who are being chased, sometimes for up to £10,000 or more. They come in with detailed files of information, and I am absolutely inclined to believe that they have been entirely honourable and honest in looking at their claims. Those families tell me that the Treasury sometimes takes the more expensive period of their child care, rather than looking at their child care costs over the period as a whole. Those families do not like the way the Treasury acts as judge and jury, with no right of appeal. That causes huge distress, so may I ask Ministers please to look again at the issue and tell us that they can do something to help those families?

Mr. Timms: We have already made some substantial changes and improvements to the way the tax credit system works. One of the consequences is, for example, that complaints to the tax credit office are down by a half, compared with two years ago, so there have certainly been considerable improvements. The tax credits transformation programme that we have put in place is delivering. I accept that there is more to be done, but it is worth remembering that 6 million families benefit from tax credits, and that includes 10 million children. That is one of the main reasons why we have been able to reduce child poverty so substantially over the past 10 years, but we need to ensure that the system works as efficiently as possible and that overpayments are minimised. We have seen a big reduction in the number of overpayments, and we will work to improve the position further.

T8. [278535] **Mr. David Burrowes** (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May I give the new Chief Secretary another opportunity, while the cat is away, to play at being open about the Government's spending plans? Given the analysis of spending plans by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Departments are projected to face a real-terms cut of 2.3 per cent., which translates into cuts totalling £20 billion. Can he come clean today and accept that the 2009 Budget heralded significant Labour cuts?

Mr. Byrne: Let me be very clear—I am afraid I will have to repeat a number of the points that I made earlier. The Chancellor set out clearly what changes will happen overall to public sector net investment over the next few years and what changes we forecast to real growth in current spending. However, as he said as recently as last oral questions, with the degree of uncertainty in the international economy that we currently face, I just do not think that now is the time to start making detailed budgets for individual Departments for the year after the Olympics.

Point of Order

3.37 pm

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is any procedure available to the House—to Ministers or Back Benchers—to extend the time available on Thursday for topical questions to the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills? The publication of ministerial responsibilities today reveals the true extent of the massive changes being planned, with responsibilities moving to and from the new Department. I have just come from another place, where I saw a private notice question to the Secretary of State and First Secretary of State, the noble Lord Mandelson, who singularly failed to convince the House of the merits of the change. The bewildering range of questions on Thursday's Order Paper shows the scale of what is happening to the Department. For once, the topical question, "If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities", is the one question to which this House needs an answer, but sadly 15 minutes will not be enough to deliver it. Is there any guidance that you can give me, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair, but the House will have noticed that from time to time I tend to run topical questions beyond 3.30 pm, because they are very popular. No doubt those on the Front Bench will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has had to say, and I thank him.

Road Signs (Tourist Destinations and Facilities)

Motion for leave to introduce a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.38 pm

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to impose duties on the Highways Agency and other public authorities to promote tourism by providing or permitting to be provided appropriate road signage; and for connected purposes.

The Bill is the product of the frustration of people whose businesses depend on tourism at the obstruction that they meet in getting approval for signs to direct motorists to their location in rural areas. They are frustrated particularly with the attitude of the Highways Agency and the planning authorities, which in turn are influenced by guidance from central Government; their frustration is shared by hon. Members. I am grateful to those who so readily agreed to be supporters of the Bill, including my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson), who is here this afternoon and who I know is seeking to deal with the same problem in his constituency.

Tourism is absolutely vital to most rural communities, and many tourist businesses depend on motorists finding their way off the main road to the wide variety of leisure, educational, catering, retail and accommodation facilities on offer. Many of those facilities depend on passing trade; others might already be known about but are difficult to find without a sign indicating where to turn off the main road.

I am not in favour of American-style billboards all over our roads and fields, advertising products that are not local, and a rush of such signs along some motorways might have prompted a tougher line being taken. That was understandable, but there is a completely different case to be made for local tourism signs. Signs for local amenities need to be attractively designed, well sited and not confusing or too numerous. It is right that there should be planning controls, so long as they are exercised proportionately and sympathetically. In too many instances, however, we find obstruction and disproportionate action.

In looking at examples of the problem, I want to distinguish between two types of sign: brown signs and privately provided signs. On trunk roads, the Highways Agency has a system for the familiar brown signs, although it is at best a fairly rigid scheme. High visitor numbers are required to qualify for a sign, for which the tourist attraction pays. On motorways, an attraction needs 250,000 visitors a year to qualify for a sign; on single carriageway roads such as the A1 in Northumberland, the figure goes down to 40,000, with the possibility of an allowance for seasonal businesses. Many tourist attractions try to get through all the hoops and meet the definitions to qualify and pay for a sign, but are still refused.

I wonder how many can match the experience of Berwick-upon-Tweed golf club at Goswick, south of Berwick. It is a beautiful seaside links course that attracts thousands of visiting golfers and will stage the pre-qualifying competition for the British Open every year for the next three years. It is the first course in the north-east to get that honour. In 2000, it paid £1,200 for

[Sir Alan Beith]

brown signs. Recently, however, the Highways Agency removed the signs, without consulting the club or allowing it to make representations.

I took the matter up with the Highways Agency, which has apologised for its failure to consult. So that is all right: the signs will go back up, won't they? Oh, no. They cannot go back up, because the Highways Agency says that they are no longer in line with its current policy on tourist signs. It says that the golf club should advise visitors through its website to look out for the road sign to Goswick and follow that route. That involves taking a dangerous turning off a single carriageway road, one of several turnings to places with confusingly similar names: Goswick, Cheswick and Fenwick. The idea that hundreds of visiting golfers should have to rely on their computer back home to spot the right turning is ridiculous. If the Highways Agency wants to prove my Bill unnecessary, it must abandon this ridiculous refusal to reinstate very necessary signs, and show more flexibility and helpfulness to rural businesses.

Another case involves a newly built country hotel at Doxford Hall, north of Alnwick, which simply needs to be added to an existing brown sign on the A1 that refers to other local amenities at Doxford. Hon. Members might have seen a reference to this place, because the owner is planning to sell it and to give the entire proceeds to cancer nursing in the community in north Northumberland—a marvellous gesture. On roads other than trunk roads, local highway authorities are responsible for the signs, and some are helpful. I gather that Northumberland county council has agreed to brown signage for Doxford Hall on the local roads, for example.

Brown signs are clearly going to be approved for and financed by only the larger tourist businesses. Small country pubs, tea rooms, animal sanctuaries, potteries, bed and breakfasts, farm shops and other smaller-scale amenities usually try to have a smaller sign on the edge of a field or on a fence alongside the road. Some of those signs are needed only during the tourist season. They require planning permission, for which there are fees to be paid, whether the application is successful or not. A couple of years ago, the Department for Communities and Local Government, through central guidance, set off a purge of roadside signs, which hit rural businesses in many parts of the country. Council officials were dispatched to remove signs. One over-zealous official in my constituency actually started painting over offending signs with a spray can.

I believe that there is a need for a more tolerant attitude, and for a simple approval process to ensure that signs provide direction to nearby tourist facilities and that they are safely sited, from a road safety point of view, proportionate and adequately designed. The absence of such a light-touch system has led to a proliferation of parked vans, farm trailers and other less attractive substitutes for proper signs—although they, too, are now covered by the planning guidance and are at risk of removal.

In a period of recession, the countryside depends more than ever on visiting tourists contributing to the rural economy. People need to be able to see where the facilities are, and it is better for road safety that the motorist can clearly see where to turn off and find a meal, a bed, a place of interest or a facility for the children. My Bill simply places obligations on the Highways Agency, highway authorities and planning authorities to help the promotion of local tourist facilities by providing appropriate road signs or permitting appropriate signs to be provided. At the moment, small businesses too often feel that the system is working against them when it should be helping them, enabling them to make their services available to the motorist and thereby to support tourism in the economy of the countryside.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sir Alan Beith, Hilary Armstrong, Mr. Nigel Evans, Mr. Adrian Sanders, Mr. David Drew, Mr. Denis Murphy and Dan Rogerson present the Bill.

Sir Alan Beith accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 June and to be printed (Bill 107).

Opposition Day

[12TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Knife Crime

Mr. Speaker: I advise the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.47 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that teenage knife crime and the increased incidence of carrying knives in many communities is one of the most critical social and law and order issues facing the country; welcomes the contribution made by the Home Affairs Select Committee in its Seventh Report, Session 2008-09, on Knife Crime, published 5 on 2 June 2009; commends the work done by voluntary sector organisations like the Damilola Taylor Trust to tackle the problem; and expresses the belief that the solution to knife crime will only come from cross-community co-operation to address its root causes.

Before I begin my remarks on the motion, I welcome the new Home Secretary and his new team to their positions. It is five years since I last did battle with the right hon. Gentleman over top-up fees, and it is a pleasure to shadow him again. I wondered whether he might prove to be the shortest-lived Home Secretary in the history of this country, but following last night's meeting of the parliamentary Labour party it appears that he might have to wait a little longer before he gets the opportunity to move into No. 10. Seriously, however, I look forward to debating the issues facing us all over the months ahead.

No doubt we will argue intensively over the failures of Government policy, but today's debate is intended to be different. I understand from the Clerks that it is customary for an Opposition day motion to be critical of the Government and their policies, but this motion is not intended to do that. Rather, it is intended to stimulate a serious discussion about an issue that has been of concern to all of us—knife crime, particularly among our young people. It is an issue that is both serious and disturbing and one that should be subject to dialogue across the political and community divides.

Last week, the Home Affairs Select Committee published a thoughtful report on the subject, and during the course of its inquiry it invited representations from across the House. The Committee took evidence from me and the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, as well as from Ministers, so it seemed logical and sensible for the House to have an early opportunity to discuss the matter. I very much hope that the Chairman of the Select Committee will be able to catch your eye, Mr. Speaker, and give us his perspectives on the inquiry.

It is also sensible to give the House the opportunity to praise and discuss the views of organisations out in the community that deal with knife crime and its consequences. Our voluntary sector does hugely valuable work in trying to break down the knife culture and the tendency of young people to become caught up in gangs. We should recognise the importance of what they do.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words about the Select Committee report and for the tone of the motion. In giving evidence to the Select Committee, he went out of his way to stress the importance of cross-party approaches, which also includes the voluntary sector. Does he agree that only by parties working together and raising the issue above party politics will we truly find a solution to knife crime?

Chris Grayling: That is right. There will be times when we debate issues on a party basis, but not because we have different objectives. We all share the objective of reducing crime and knife crime and of restoring stability to communities affected by it. There may be times when we disagree over methods or are critical of Ministers because we think they have got it wrong. That is right and proper, but organisations and individuals out there are looking to this House for a grown-up and mature debate. It is right and proper that with an issue as serious as this one we take a step back from time to time and have a grown-up discussion of the kind that the right hon. Gentleman rightly started in his Home Affairs Committee.

Before I get to the heart of the debate, I want to make one important point. There is no arms race going on among all children in the United Kingdom, nor are all seven-year-olds carrying knives for their elders. There is an acute gang problem in some parts of the country, particularly in inner-city areas and most significantly in parts of London, but the vast majority of young people are decent, law-abiding citizens, getting on with their lives, taking their exams, working on a Saturday morning and having fun on a Saturday night. We must not allow a serious and important debate to create the sense that young people are a problem today.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the thoughtful way in which the hon. Gentleman is approaching this topic. I entirely endorse what he said about the majority of young people being law-abiding and going about their business as excellent young citizens in the making. Does he agree, however, that one issue with which all of us—politicians and others—need to engage is the fact that there is a fear race going on out there? As the evidence taken by our Select Committee confirmed, young people are often frightened of the streets, and frightened of the images conveyed to them about other people carrying weapons. We have a serious duty to get the balance right, and our media colleagues have a serious duty to help us.

Chris Grayling: That is absolutely true. We should not seek to create a climate of fear. In the vast majority of our communities, this is not the issue that it is in some inner-city areas, although there are certainly law-and-order problems up and down the country involving antisocial behaviour and some criminality. Happily, the incidence of serious knife crime remains limited to a relatively small number of communities, but it is there none the less, and it is to protect young people that we need to continue this debate. They are far more likely to be the victims of knife crime, and to be scarred for life or even worse. It is for their protection that we need to get this right.

[Chris Grayling]

The reality of the situation is quite stark. The level of fatal stabbings is the highest on record. There has been a 34 per cent. increase in the number of people killed by sharp instruments such as knives in recent years. The number of people stabbed to death in England and Wales increased from 201 a decade ago to 270 in 2007-08, the highest figure on record. That is a serious problem. A serious knife crime—although not a homicide—is committed every hour. According to recent figures, 22,151 serious offences involving knives were recorded in England and Wales in 2008. That is equivalent to 400 a week, or one every half hour. We are dealing with a major problem, although it is more confined to some communities than to others.

The Select Committee's report highlights the contradictions that exist between some of the figures that are available. There have certainly been improvements in some areas covered by Government programmes, although I must say that I should have been worried if there had not been, given the money that has been spent. Equally, however, there is an inescapable pattern that illustrates the scale of the problem.

The Committee points out that there has been a big increase in the number of knife injuries since the mid-1990s, as is made clear by hospital episode statistics, and that the biggest increase has taken place since 2006. There is also an alarmingly high propensity to carry knives. A 2008 MORI youth survey indicated that 31 per cent. of 11 to 16-year-olds in mainstream education and 61 per cent. of excluded young people had carried a weapon at some point during the preceding year. Of course those figures are bound to mask some legitimate activity, such as the carrying of a penknife by a boy scout, but the overall picture is nevertheless unhappy. The Committee also points out that random knife crime against strangers is relatively rare, although the terrible attack in Grimsby this week is an indication that it remains a threat.

I believe—and here my view may differ slightly from the Select Committee's interpretation—that the real problem lies in the gang culture in many areas. Whether kids carry knives because they are in gangs or because they are afraid of gangs—the point made by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck)—in many areas it is the gang culture that drives the problem, and I think that we must break that gang culture if we are to deal with the problem of knife crime.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): As I am sure my hon. Friend accepts, gang culture exists not only out in the community but, increasingly, on the young offender prison estate. On admission to custody, the first thing that young offenders almost certainly do is join a gang, which causes tremendous trouble on the estate.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He knows about the reality of the situation from his professional experience, and he has taken an active interest in young offender institutions, their workings and their failings. I have visited a number of such institutions, and I share his concern about the fact that the gang culture is being perpetuated within prison walls—as, indeed, are some other problems that we face.

The root causes of the gang culture that leads to knife crime lie right across the policy spectrum, but they tend to be found in the same geographical areas. If we were to map out geographically rates of worklessness, family breakdown, educational failure and addiction in the family, we would find a high correlation between social breakdown and the gang culture, and the report makes it clear that there is a link between deprivation, gang membership and knife crime.

Ms Buck: Is the hon. Gentleman also aware of research by the Sutton Trust, an educational research organisation, that importantly confirmed the apparent correlation between certain types of violent crime and inequality? It is not just a question of deprivation equalling violence; the sharp impact of inequalities in society unfortunately also has an influence on how some people behave.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which she might elaborate on if she makes a speech later.

The truth is that those who join gangs often come from the most difficult family backgrounds—from an environment where they feel neglected and unwanted. Gang membership brings a perverse sense of belonging that they might not ever have got at home. It also exposes them to the danger of being exploited by the hardcore who build gangs around them, and increasingly by organised criminals who exploit local gangs for illegal trade, particularly in drugs. Some younger children are also vulnerable to being used by older gang members as caddies and—I know this from talking to young people in such circumstances—for carrying and hiding firearms. The Select Committee was right to seek information from the Home Office about the number of prosecutions in relation to caddies under the Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006, and I hope the Home Secretary will make reference to this issue in his speech.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful contribution. I do not disagree with any of his points about what kinds of young people are most likely to become gang members, but in my constituency I have been particularly concerned about the dynamics of gang activity. We wanted to set up a youth facility in a school that crossed a geographical boundary, but many young people in my community—both those who did belong to gangs and those who did not—were not prepared to cross it. We have to understand more about gang dynamics if we are to make an impact on this problem.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and it illustrates why we must have community groups on the ground engaging in these problems. They understand the problems best, and former gang members can also be a powerful influence in trying to encourage young people who are a part of gangs away from them. They, more than anyone else, understand gang culture.

I am also in no doubt that tougher police action to smash up gangs is necessary. We have to break up the hardcore, and also, in a constructive way, peel away those around the fringes. Those two elements of the strategy are extremely important. To that end, the Select Committee has made a number of valuable suggestions.

I do not agree with every one of its recommendations, but I think the report should provide a reference point for debating the issues.

I was particularly struck by the Committee's comments about the influence of violent videos and video games on those with a propensity to violence. In most cases for most children, playing a violent video game is not going to turn them into a knife-wielding troublemaker, but for some it clearly can. The Committee's comments about the presence of such material in detention institutions also raised a concern.

The Committee is right to highlight the need both to break down barriers between young people and the police and to address the reasons some young people seek "respect" on the streets. I also agree with it on the need for improved intervention at the point where a young person is excluded from school. However, there is in my view one area that can make a particularly great difference. In my evidence to the Select Committee, I focused on the need for early intervention. I believe that a successful battle against emerging antisocial behaviour can play an important role in combating more serious offences, particularly knife crime. As a society we do not intervene early enough to say no to a young miscreant. Most serious knife criminals are young men in their later teens, but all the anecdotal evidence I have been given is that they are often the same young men who three or four years earlier were responsible for less serious acts of antisocial behaviour in their communities. Not every 13 or 14-year-old troublemaker goes on to commit more serious offences—far from it—but some do, and we could do more to stop them.

Ms Buck: Does the hon. Gentleman agree, therefore, that we should be ensuring at least a guarantee of continuance, but preferably an expansion; of some of the early intervention programmes that we have been developing, such as the youth intervention programmes and the youth offending teams? We have rolled out a range of early intervention schemes in recent years and their continuation is utterly reliant on Government funding.

Chris Grayling: I shall go on to say a little more about how we need a mix of intervention to rein back and constructive engagement.

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his remarks—he is absolutely right about this antisocial behaviour point. My local police in Kettering have told me that they know who all the teenage troublemakers are and they are becoming increasingly frustrated that they do not really have the powers to deal with the problem effectively. The Home Office is rolling out the fixed penalty notice scheme in six police forces around the country, whereby they will be able to issue notices to teenagers below the age of 16. That is not available at the moment in Northamptonshire, but it is a tool that the local police would very much like to have, because they could use it to deal effectively with the ringleaders and troublemakers among teenage groups.

Chris Grayling: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need simple powers to be able to intervene early; indeed, I was going to set out some of the ways in which such change might work. We need a quicker, more comprehensive programme of early interventions designed to stop young people going off the rails without their being pushed straight into the criminal justice system and getting a criminal record that will blight their future. Far too often interventions are made too late in a teenager's life and by the time the criminal justice system is brought into play irreversible behaviours have built themselves into that person's life.

That does not mean that young people should not face the full force of the law if they have committed a serious offence—there will always be a need for some to be arrested and prosecuted because they have done so—but earlier, lighter and more straightforward interventions should be available to try to rein them back. As the Home Secretary will know, I have argued for a 21st century version of the clip round the ear: a series of swift, fair measures that can be deployed more nimbly than some of the cumbersome measures that are in place. That was what the Government originally intended with antisocial behaviour orders, but in the end they have created a system that takes too long to implement.

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of using serious penalties when necessary, so are the official Opposition still in favour of a presumption of a custodial sentence for all knife carriers?

Chris Grayling: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will address that specific point a little later in my remarks—I will answer his question.

What we have proposed at this stage of the process is giving the police simple powers—working with a local magistrate—to issue grounding orders to young troublemakers and to apply simple community service penalties that do not give those young people a long-term criminal record. There will, of course, be instances where people break the law and use a knife to attack someone, and we need to have punishments available to break this cycle. That is why we also need tougher enforcement and sentencing. The precursor of a tougher approach on knife crime is getting more police officers out from behind desks and on to the streets, which is why it is so important that the Home Secretary continues to see through, and accelerates, the process of reducing police bureaucracy and paperwork, and why he will find, as he takes on his new job, that progress in some areas has been too slow. I hope that he will be able to accelerate things.

We also need to get much tougher when sentencing young people who are caught carrying knives or who commit other knife crimes. The issue of whether sentences should be custodial was extensively debated by the Select Committee—and with me when I gave evidence to it. I do not think that the current system imposes sufficiently stiff penalties. That must change because we need to create an environment where the default is not to carry a knife and where there is a big risk in carrying a knife, so that those who are more likely to offend do not do so and those who are afraid do not need to do so.

The starting point should be that anyone carrying a knife without a reasonable excuse should expect to be prosecuted—there are still those who are let off with a caution. We should make it clear that people convicted of carrying a knife should expect to receive a custodial sentence.

[Chris Grayling]

I made the point to the Select Committee that the presumption should be that offenders will be sent to jail. The minimum sentence should be a community penalty, with the offender doing positive work in the community, not a fine or a caution. We should not remove all discretion from the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service or the police, but if the norm is a tough penalty it will have the effect of deterring many people from carrying knives in the first place and removing the pressure to carry them that some feel.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point. Part of what is needed is certainty, so that people who are committing crimes know what will be the consequence if they are caught. Part of the problem is that too many community sentences such as the intensive supervision and surveillance programme see routine breaches that do not lead to any comeback on the offender. Does he agree that there is a danger that that builds in a sense that people can break the rules and get away with it?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a danger in the criminal justice system that we do not see things through, whether it is the enforcement of an antisocial behaviour order or the enforcement of a community penalty. If people see that they can get away with things, they will not respect the law. It is fundamentally important that if there is a penalty, we see it through and do not just let it lapse.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): On penalties, will the shadow Home Secretary indicate what he believes the age of criminal responsibility should be?

Chris Grayling: I see no reason to change the age of criminal responsibility at the moment, but I want those who carry knives around in their teenage years to be brought before the law and dealt with accordingly. I do not want a seven-year-old who is being used as a caddy to be prosecuted, I want the person using them as a caddy to be prosecuted. That is how the law should work.

Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): What about an 11-year-old who has brought a knife out from home? Would the hon. Gentleman decide that that was criminal activity?

Chris Grayling: It clearly would be criminal activity, but if we get things right and create an environment in which we have tough sanctions for people caught carrying a knife, 11-year-olds will not feel the need to do so. That is the step that we have to take. We must create an environment in which people feel that there is a risk in carrying a knife, and therefore do not choose to do so. The risk that we can offer is a penalty that they will not wish to receive.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman believe that another matter that we should examine in relation to knives is the people who sell them? There have been many problems with them in the past and quite a lot of debates about the matter in the House. What is his view about that?

Chris Grayling: I would be open to all ideas as to how we can restrict the sale of knives to young people, and many retailers seek to do that. The problem is that it is not difficult for someone to buy a Sabatier kitchen knife from Sainsbury's, pass it to one of the kids in their gang and go out and cause mayhem. That is the challenge—in our society, a knife is not a difficult thing to get hold of. We can take every step we want to restrict their sale, but ultimately that is a big problem for us.

There is one other area in which we need much tougher action. Drug dealing is endemic in many areas affected by knife crime. The Government have given out mixed messages about drugs in recent years, not just on classification but on sentencing policy and implementation. The truth is that we let off a significant proportion of drug dealers with just a caution, even those dealing in class A drugs such as heroin. That cannot be right, and it must change.

The Home Affairs Committee was absolutely right about the need for projects that engage and distract young people. We need both the carrot and the stick to deal with the problems of youth crime and knife crime. Up and down the country really worthwhile youth projects are helping, particularly in areas of deprivation where serious trouble and criminality can develop. There is the Frontline church's youth work in Liverpool, Friday night football in Hampshire—in the constituency of the hon. Member for Eastleigh, where I commend the work being done by his local police—and martial arts work in Derbyshire. Those are all examples that I have seen in recent months of work being done to engage young people and get them away from an environment in which they may get into trouble.

Mr. Hollobone: To add to my hon. Friend's list, may I mention young firefighter schemes? Another big problem area of teenage crime is arson, particularly of school premises. Active participation in such schemes kills two birds with one stone.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree, and I pay tribute to fire services up and down the country that, along with their more straightforward work of putting out fires and cutting people out of wrecked cars, are doing serious work in engaging young people and involving them in life around fire stations and fire services. They are helping in the engagement process.

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about the importance of youth activity. May I also remind him of the importance of youth leaders being able to challenge young people who carry and use knives? Some 10 years ago I was a volunteer youth worker in Peckham and Bermondsey in south London and I remember having to ask the young people to leave their knives at the entrance when they came in to play basketball. The fact that young people participate in a youth activity does not mean that they stop their offending behaviour. That needs challenging by strong youth leaders.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right, and one of the things that make for an especially strong youth project is the leader, and their credibility in the eyes of those who participate. If it is someone who has been there, who knows and understands the streets, and who can challenge that behaviour, it is more likely to succeed.

The Centre for Social Justice and the Damilola Taylor Trust are offering awards to those who lead the most innovative projects in deprived areas, and the Mayor of London has set up several mentoring and engagement programmes for young Londoners that have the potential to make a real difference. However, as the Select Committee points out in its report, there are too few volunteers in too many areas to do everything that could be done. As Members of Parliament, we can all encourage volunteering in our communities and support it where it takes place.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Hollobone) has a point. We have similar problems in Coventry, and the Rotarians run a scheme every year that involves the police, the fire brigade and several voluntary organisations. They show kids the consequences of stealing a car and wrapping it around a tree. It is a very worthwhile scheme, and that is the sort of thing that we should consider.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is right. For many of the young people who take part in such schemes, who come from the most deprived backgrounds, it is a new experience to have something positive to do and to be engaged in constructive activity. That is why the carrot—the community work and the support locally—is so important.

This is not a battle that any of us can afford to lose. Week after week, we hear reports of young people whose lives have been tragically cut short or who have suffered terrible injuries at the hands of other young people carrying knives. The Government have brought forward several initiatives, but the danger is always that Home Office initiatives just cost money and do not make much difference. I suspect that success will not lie simply with the efforts of this Government or a future one—albeit sincere and well meant—but with the way in which we harness the efforts of our whole society to try to turn back this unwelcome tide. It is important to ensure that in these difficult financial times the smaller voluntary projects that can make a disproportionate difference are not the first to be squeezed financially.

We have to tackle the root causes of worklessness, educational failure and family breakdown, and we have to foster a revolution in what we have dubbed our broken society. But we also need to deliver the direct, on-the-ground support that can steer those young people caught up in the knife culture away from it. The Damilola Taylor Trust and the Prince's Trust are spearheading the "no to knives" coalition to seek to make a difference. I hope and believe that harnessing different groups to do what we as politicians cannot do on our own will help to create a coalition that can really transform things on the ground. I commend the groups involved in that work. They have the support of the present Government and will have the support of a future Conservative Government in continuing that work. We all want to see the day when serious youth knife crime is a thing of the past. Our job is to work together to bring that day about as quickly as possible.

4.13 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Alan Johnson): I beg to move an amendment, at end add:

"further recognises that tougher penalties are being implemented against those who commit knife crimes, including a rise in the proportion of those caught carrying knives getting custodial sentences; supports the expectation to prosecute for knife possession and doubling of the maximum sentence for carrying a knife in public from two to four years; recognises that the Government has backed tough police enforcement action in the tackling knives action programme areas, including increased use of stop and search, noting that there were nearly 200,000 stop and searches, resulting in the recovery of over 3,500 knives, between June 2008 and March 2009; welcomes the additional investment going to providing targeted youth activity, including on Friday and Saturday nights; and welcomes recent provisional NHS figures showing a reduction in hospital admissions of teenagers following assaults by sharp objects."

I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) for his remarks and his welcome to me as Home Secretary. I do indeed remember the last time we faced each other over the Dispatch Box—

Rob Marris: You won!

Alan Johnson: I like to think that the nation won—*[Laughter.]* On any disagreements that we have at the moment, the hon. Gentleman may catch up in a couple of years. We were talking about variable tuition fees—we do not call them top-up fees—and at the time he and his party were staunchly against them, but now they are very much for them. That is probably a prerequisite for the debates that we will have about home affairs.

I welcome this opportunity to debate this important issue for the first time with the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell and his Opposition colleagues, and with other Members. I do not think that there is anything at all in the Opposition motion with which we would disagree and the spirit in which it was moved reflects the importance that we all place on tackling knife crime. It also reflects the concern about knife crime felt on both sides of this House.

Rob Marris: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his post. May I particularly welcome from the Back Benches the Government's approach to this debate? The amendment before us this afternoon is an addition to the Opposition main motion, and does not traduce it. That is a welcome change.

Alan Johnson: According to the "A.B.C of Chairmanship" by Lord Citrine, on which I was raised, we would call our change an addendum, rather than an amendment, but there we are. I think that that is the right spirit in which to tackle this issue.

I am also pleased that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell welcomed the recent report from the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which has made such a valuable contribution to this debate.

The tragic cases of youngsters killed because of knife crime in London and elsewhere have shocked and saddened the nation. Reducing knife crime and crime among young people more widely is of paramount importance, not only because of the need to deal with the very small minority of young people who are persistent offenders and who cause considerable anxiety and harm to their victims, families and communities, but because addressing the issues that can lead to criminality among young people is essential for a fairer, safer society.

The Government's addendum is designed to ensure that the progress that is being made by the hard work of so many people is properly recognised. First, on the more general issue of youth crime, it is encouraging to

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see that the numbers of young people entering the criminal justice system for the first time fell by 9.4 per cent. between 2006-07 and 2007-08. Between 2000 and 2007, the frequency of reoffending among young people fell by 23 per cent.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion. On the philosophy of behaviour, how confident is he that all young people know that murder is wrong and that it is at the apex of antisocial behaviour not because it breaks the law or because a custodial sentence might be handed out to them by a judge but because it breaks behavioural norms and the moral order in society? What does the Secretary of State believe is the benchmark by which young people judge that murder is unacceptable?

Alan Johnson: I believe that it would offend all civilised values to think that any young person—other than, perhaps, young people from the most deprived and difficult backgrounds, who have experienced such violence from their early years—would believe that murder was anything other than a crime, and a heinous crime at that. I am not quite sure what point the hon. Gentleman is raising. However, if it is that we have to reinforce these arguments and to consider things such as video games—I welcome their inclusion in the Select Committee's report—and that we have to ensure that the message of how heinous such crimes are is reinforced to young people over and over again, not just by figures who they would see as figures of authority but by peer groups and people in their community, his point is well taken.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): On the question of young people's attitude to murder, is it not perhaps so much that they think that murder is acceptable but that they believe in their gangs and their communities that anything is acceptable when it comes to enforcing respect, to territorial defence of their gang or to demonstrating how much of a man they are? It is such attitudes that we have to undermine.

Alan Johnson: From all my experience, I think that my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Incidentally, my press office had arranged for me to meet some police on Westminster's Churchill Gardens estate yesterday and to walk around for my first on-camera shot as Home Secretary. By a real coincidence, that was where I was badly assaulted when I was 15. I came from the rough end of Notting Hill, and thought that this was a posh area of Pimlico, but the problem was a territorial thing because we were in an area that was not our territory.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) is absolutely right to say that such attitudes are ingrained in people, but sometimes they can be reinforced by the things that they see and read. That is why I want to repeat that the Home Affairs Committee has done us a service by mentioning the fact that people feel that they have to go to that extra level to prove how hard and tough they are, and how much harder and tougher they are than the other gang.

Mr. Henry Bellingham (North-West Norfolk) (Con): I was delighted to hear the Home Secretary say a moment ago that recidivism was falling. That is very positive, but does he share my concern about a small number of dangerous offenders who are convicted and imprisoned? Does he agree that, before they are released on licence, there must be a proper risk assessment and an absolute guarantee of ongoing supervision and monitoring?

Alan Johnson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Although I have not absorbed every aspect of this job in the last couple of days, my sense is that what he describes is already happening, and on an increasing basis, so that is an important contribution.

The youth crime action plan launched in the summer of last year is not only helping to bring young offenders to account for their actions, but is providing more support to address the underlying causes of poor behaviour. It places a greater focus on prevention to tackle the low-level but serious problems such as truancy or exclusion that put young people at increased risk of becoming involved in crime or antisocial behaviour.

Family intervention projects, which provide intensive and non-negotiable support for families living in chaotic circumstances, are having a remarkable impact. They are improving school attendance and behaviour, reducing incidences of domestic violence, and improving parenting skills. Operation Staysafe is preventing vulnerable young people from being drawn into criminal activity. The police remove youngsters from the streets late at night—a sort of 21st century version of the clip round the ear—and work with social services to establish what further interventions may be necessary to prevent them becoming victims of crime, or indeed, offenders.

There are now around 5,300 Safer Schools partnerships fostering better relationships between police and young people, with dedicated police officers working in schools to help tackle the causes of crime and antisocial behaviour. After-school patrols on bus routes and at transport hubs are tackling antisocial behaviour at school closing time, giving greater reassurance to parents and pupils.

Mr. Hollobone: I am pleased that the Home Secretary has moved on to the issue of parental responsibility. When I went out with the local police in Kettering, a number of teenagers were causing trouble and the police took them home to their families—who did not want to know. In fact, they were cross with the police for bringing the children back, so what more can the Government do to emphasise the point that parents have a big role to play in the activities that their teenagers get up to?

Alan Johnson: The next stage would be parenting orders or family contracts, and there is a range of other measures that can be used. I discussed this matter with a chief constable only this morning and I was told that, although some parents do not take full responsibility and act in an unacceptable way, the approach that the hon. Gentleman has described works on many occasions. It is a simple thing, but very effective. It always amazes me that, before the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, the police did not have the power to take a truant back to school, let alone take a child back home. The simple powers that the police have asked for are very necessary, in my view.

I have talked about the more general issue of youth crime but, on the specific issue of knife crime, there are now tougher penalties for those who carry knives. The

maximum sentence has been doubled and those convicted are more likely to go to prison. The age at which a person may purchase a knife has been raised to 18 and it is now an offence to mind a weapon on someone else's behalf.

In June last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), my predecessor as Home Secretary, to whom I pay tribute for the work that she has done in this post over the past two years, launched the tackling knives action programme focused on 10 police forces across England and Wales rapidly to address the issue of knife crime in those areas. We now have an extended programme covering 16 areas, and have invested a total of £12 million. The programme is not only taking knives off the streets. It is also improving understanding among young people of the dangers of knife possession. As the Home Affairs Committee report acknowledged last week, there has been a notable reduction in hospital admissions for stab wounds in the areas where the programme is running.

Our amendment to the motion welcomes provisional figures published last month, which suggested a substantial reduction in the number of hospital admissions caused by the assault with a knife or sharp object of 13 to 19-year-olds for the 12 months ending January 2009 compared with the same period the previous year. Since the amendment was published just yesterday, a more recent set of figures published this morning shows that the trend is continuing, with a drop of 22 per cent. in admissions of teenagers with stab wounds during the tackling knives action programme implementation period from June 2008 to February 2009, compared with the same period the previous year. Provisional figures show a drop of 26 per cent. across England and a fall of 30 per cent. in nine tackling knives action programme areas.

Keith Vaz: I welcome the Home Secretary to his new post. I know that he will be a terrific success in all the challenges that he will face over the next few years. *[Interruption.]* With reference to his kind words about the Home Affairs Committee report, which we gratefully accept, one of the key points that we made on admissions to hospitals was that it was important that information should be shared between agencies. For example, the NHS trust in Manchester shares its information with the police and other agencies. Is it not important that that should happen across the country? That is one way to tackle the problem in a particular area.

Alan Johnson: I am tempted to blame the Health Secretary for the present state of affairs. May I say how much I appreciate my right hon. Friend's contribution in this area, which, as Home Secretary, I know I will appreciate even more? When I was Secretary of State for Health, we made it clear in the operating framework, which is an important document for the health service and used to be called their marching orders, that it was a tier 3 local priority to exchange information and to engage and co-operate in this way. As a result, double the number of hospitals now provide the information. I accept that we have to go further, but that is an important result, given that we made it an operating framework tier 3 priority only last December. We are on the right track.

The figures are extremely encouraging. During the action plan's first phase, there were 200,000 stop and searches and 3,500 knives were seized.

Emily Thornberry: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post. My area is one in which the action programme has been introduced because of the problems that we have had with knife crime, resulting in a number of deaths, ending, unfortunately, with Ben Kinsella's murder last summer. Youngsters were afraid to go out on the street because they thought other people were carrying knives, so they carried them themselves. The introduction of random stop and search among all young people was extremely helpful in putting a cap on the carrying of knives. I commend the policy.

Alan Johnson: It is valuable to get that first-hand experience from one of the TKAP areas. I am sure that that experience is repeated elsewhere.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way, and I echo those comments. However, he will surely realise that there is no such thing as random stop and search; it can be carried out only when a section 60 power is in place, and then it lasts for only 24 hours. Is that not one of the problems that he might want to address—how to enable random stop and searches in areas where there are real problems?

Alan Johnson: I acknowledge the special knowledge—the special constable knowledge, even—of the hon. Gentleman. I shall look at that issue, but, once again, my discussion with the chief constable of Warwickshire this morning suggested what the figures show—that, after eight months, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. These are eighth month statistics: 3,500 knives seized from 200,000 stop and searches. So we are at least on the right road, but, of course, I shall look at other issues.

Emily Thornberry: In Islington, if an area had particular problems, the police were given for a limited period but for much longer than 24 hours the power to stop all youngsters, and that really helped.

Alan Johnson: I do not like to intervene in the conversation about stop and search, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Select Committee was right, however, to raise the concern that a small number of young people are worried about their safety and feel that they need to carry knives to protect themselves. Senior police officers have told us that the fact that fewer stop and searches now uncover a weapon suggests that the number being carried is declining further. But it is absolutely critical that we get the message across to young people that carrying a knife does not make them safer.

The advertising campaign "It Doesn't Have to Happen" has been designed by young people, for young people, with that precise purpose. Aimed at 10 to 16-year-olds, the adverts portray unflinchingly the physical effects of knife wounds and have been viewed more than 13 million times. Of those youngsters surveyed, 73 per cent. said that they were less likely to carry a knife as a result of seeing the advert.

Through the Be Safe programme, 1 million young people will be able to attend workshops over the next five years on the dangers of knives and other weapons. We cannot be the slightest bit complacent, and one knife crime is one too many, but police forces tell us of encouraging signs that knife carrying is falling among

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young people; and the statistics on NHS admissions and on crimes committed support that view. Between October and December 2008, there were seven fewer fatal stabbings compared with the same period the previous year.

I completely agree with the reference in the Opposition's motion to "cross-community co-operation". Community and voluntary sector organisations have a crucial role to play in tackling knife crime. The motion is right to praise the work of the Damilola Taylor Trust, and I mention in particular Damilola Taylor's father, Richard Taylor, who was appointed by the Prime Minister in February to be his special envoy on youth violence and knife crime.

Keith Vaz: I am most grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way a second time. We in the Select Committee were very keen to ensure that our report was not a knee-jerk reaction to another tragic death; that is why we took six months to complete it. We have also decided that, at the end of July, we will bring the stakeholders together to consider the report's conclusions thoughtfully. I am very pleased that the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), has agreed to participate in that seminar, and I hope that the Home Secretary will also find the time to come along and give us his views on the issue—as a way of keeping the issue going and retaining the consensus, which is extremely important. Without the stakeholders working together, no single agency can solve the problem of an increase in knife crime.

Alan Johnson: That is a very important development. Around that time, after the first year of the tackling knives action programme, we will be hosting an event, so perhaps we could combine the two in some way. I shall talk to my right hon. Friend about that.

It has been acknowledged that projects that work with young people and provide peer mentoring, diversionary activities, education and training can help prevent them from becoming offenders. That is why investing in better local services and activities for young people is so important, and, through the youth opportunity fund and the youth capital fund, and schemes such as the myplace programme, we are providing a total of £900 million to improve local services for young people. The best providers of such services are often local and community groups, which have a profound knowledge of the area and the needs of the people with whom they work. Over the next three years, we have specifically earmarked £4.5 million to help up to 150 local groups that are working to tackle knife crime, gun crime, and gang-related activity. We will announce the successful bidders for money from that fund next week.

Justine Greening *rose—*

Alan Johnson: I will give way one final time.

Justine Greening: On that point, apparently 20 per cent. of volunteers in Britain are male, and 80 per cent. are female. Obviously, many of the issues that we are discussing relate to male role models, or a lack of them. Does the Home Secretary have any views on what we could do to encourage more men in our communities to get involved and play a role in helping to be role models for young adults—younger males—whom they could probably help with the benefit of their experience?

Alan Johnson: The Minister of State, Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), just reminded me about Baroness Neuberger's report on volunteering. Also, I know from my constituency that every year, in volunteers' week, a special push is made to get people who do not normally volunteer—sometimes that is men, but it is other groups in our community, too—to realise the benefits of volunteering. There is more that we can do in that regard.

The issue of knife crime among young people is serious, and the motion rightly reflects that fact, but the tackling knives action programme is showing encouraging early signs of success. Through tougher action on those who offend and a greater focus on the causes of knife crime, and through excellent leadership and strong partnerships between the police, schools, social services and community groups, properly organised and adequately funded, I believe that we can address an issue that is rightly seen by the public as absolutely critical to the well-being of our society.

The issue will be one of my major priorities in the coming months. Along with the Secretaries of State for Justice and for Children, Schools and Families, I will host an event in July, as I have said, to discuss the outcomes and experiences of the first year of the tackling knives action programme, and will consider what further steps need to be taken to keep knives off our streets. I commend the Opposition for tabling the motion, and I commend the amendment to the House.

4.37 pm

Chris Huhne (Eastleigh) (LD): I, too, very much welcome the tone and the approach taken by the official Opposition, who have given us an opportunity to discuss this key issue. I also very much welcome the approach taken by the Home Affairs Committee in its attempt to build cross-party consensus, which hopefully can make real progress on the issue. May I also welcome the new Home Secretary to his post? I look forward to lively debate with him in the coming weeks and months, in the hope that I may agree with him on Home Office policy as much as I do on electoral reform.

The official Opposition are absolutely right in their motion: knife crime is one of the most serious problems facing Britain today. The number of children admitted to hospital having been assaulted with knives has gone up by 83 per cent. in five years. That is frankly shocking, but sadly there are no simple solutions, as we have heard; there is, perhaps, consensus across the House on that. We need a response from the education and health services, the police and the criminal justice system, so I was heartened to see the emphasis on cross-community co-operation to address the root causes of knife crime in the motion, and to hear it in the speech of the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling). That appears to us to be a new emphasis, which we welcome.

There is, however, still a clear distinction between the approach of Liberal Democrat Members on the one hand, and the approach of the Opposition and the Government on the other. That is highlighted in the addendum to the motion that the Government propose.

Those two parties still continuously seek to try to outdo one another by advocating tougher penalties, which in the main serve to criminalise young people. By contrast, we believe that what is needed is an effective system of prevention that tackles the root causes of why people, particularly young people, carry knives, and which is coupled with targeted, intelligence-led, visible policing. We need to reassure young people that they do not need to carry knives for their own safety, and we need the support of the community to catch and convict those who threaten others.

Last year, 43 young people died from stab wounds. Of the 773 homicides in Britain in 2007-08, 270—35 per cent., or a little over a third—were caused by sharp instruments. That is the highest number of knife killings since records began in 1997, and it represents an increase of a third since that year. There was a 48 per cent. increase in stab-related hospital admissions between 1997-98 and 2006-07, and nearly 50,000 people, including 4,510 children, have been treated in hospital for knife wounds since the Government came to power.

Knife crime disproportionately affects young people. Between 2003 and 2007, stab-related hospital admissions for under-16s increased by 63 per cent. The Youth Justice Board's 2008 MORI youth survey found that 17 per cent. of 11 to 16-year-olds in mainstream education had carried a knife in the previous year; the figure rises to 54 per cent. among young people who have been excluded from school. Some 85 per cent. of young people who carry knives claim that they do so for their own protection.

Those statistics speak for themselves. The toll of knife crime is horrendous and its increasing regularity is rightly fixed in the public consciousness as an overwhelming problem. There can be few more graphic or horrifying thoughts for any parent than that of their child being attacked with a knife. The images that we have seen in the media of the devastation wrought by knife crime over the past few months and years remain a harrowing reminder of the damage that these crimes can do.

The Government have made progress in tackling knife crime, but the problem remains far too large. In the eight months to November 2008, 3,259 people were admitted to hospital in England with stab wounds; that was a fall of 9 per cent. on the same period in the previous year, but it still represents a very substantial level. Furthermore, 604 of the victims were teenagers.

The tentative improvements are welcome, but they are far from being enough. Despite the evident escalation in the problem during the Government's period in power, Ministers have clearly not given the sustained priority to tackling the problem that it deserves. We had some sense of the issue in the exchange between the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee and the Home Secretary earlier in this debate, but to our continuing amazement Ministers have not fully implemented tactics that have been proven to work dramatically to reduce the problem. I shall come back to that issue in detail.

The effective policing of knife crime is about intelligence-led stop and search. Many people on estates where the problem is most serious know exactly who the menace is, but they are afraid to say. Visible and approachable policing is essential, not just for reassurance—as I said, many young people carry knives because they are afraid, not because they intend to use them—but for intelligence gathering. Metal detecting arches and wands used by police have helped to tackle knife crime, with outstanding success in areas such as Newham in east London, where I have seen them in operation.

However, one of the most effective means of reducing knife crime has not been rolled out nationally—in part, I suspect, because it needs co-operation between the Department of Health and the Home Office. I am referring to the so-called Cardiff model, which was created six years ago by Professor Jonathan Shepherd, a surgeon in Cardiff. The aim of the model is to improve police effectiveness and reduce emergency department admissions for violent crime-related injuries.

The accident and emergency department collects anonymous data on the precise location and time of the violent incident when patients first attend. Those data are shared by the hospital trust with the crime and disorder reduction partnership. The partnership then produces maps of violent crime, including knife crime, for its area, allowing the police to track violent crime trends and allocate resources to violent crime hot spots accordingly. That proven technique has cut hospital admissions for violence-related attendances by 40 per cent. in Cardiff. That information is from a peer-reviewed study; it is good, hard, solid evidence. In Cardiff's Home Office family of 15 similar cities, it went from mid-table in 2002 to safest city in May 2007. In a recent study for the think-tank Reform, Cardiff was 51st out of 55 towns and cities with a population of more than 100,000 in terms of incidences of robbery or assault.

In other words, the experiment clearly worked. It began in 2002, and the Department of Health commissioned a paper from Professor Shepherd in 2004. It was updated again, explicitly for the then Health Secretary, who is now Home Secretary, in October 2007. However, a parliamentary question that I tabled both to the Home Office and to the Department of Health in November 2008 revealed that information on hospitals running such a scheme was not centrally collected. I am pleased that the Home Secretary has provided some evidence of progress in rolling out the scheme, but when will all hospitals be applying it and co-operating with their local police services? When, indeed, will all hospitals in TKAP areas be co-operating? My office had to submit a freedom of information request to all English NHS trusts, which revealed that as of today, of 135 relevant trusts that answered my request, only 29 share data in this way—just over 21 per cent.

I am pleased that the Home Affairs Committee has picked up on this point, which I made to it in evidence. At paragraph 39 of its conclusions, it says:

> "We were disappointed to learn that this has not been fully implemented throughout England and Wales and recommend that this is done immediately. All agencies within partnerships should have an equal duty to share."

This should not be a political issue: it is very straightforward. We know that the scheme leads to dramatic falls in cutting knife crime—it is an easy hit—but it has one major snag: it involves two Government Departments working together on a matter of overwhelming priority for the public, and I am afraid that until now they have signally failed to do so.

Alan Johnson: Will the hon. Gentleman place on record, for the sake of my successor as Health Secretary, that he is saying that we should insist from the centre

[Alan Johnson]

that every local acute trust must adopt this system? I say that because I have spent the past two years being lectured by Liberal Democrat Front Benchers about the need to devolve power to the front line and not to engage in central direction.

Chris Huhne: That is an absolutely splendid smokescreen from the former Secretary of State for Health, not least because he knows very well that the only elected person in charge of the national health service is the Secretary of State for Health. I am convinced that if the NHS had accountability to elected people on the lines proposed by the Liberal Democrats the change would have been far more dramatic. People want knife crime to be tackled, and they do not want a load of excuses from one part of Government about not delivering on an objective set by another part of Government.

Keith Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the evidence that he gave to the Select Committee and the useful comments that he made about Cardiff. I agree with him. Of course it is important that local areas should make decisions on their own, but where, as in this respect, there is a clear-cut case for the sharing of information because it will help other agencies to ensure that knife crime is reduced, it is important that the Government accept that recommendation and implement it.

Chris Huhne: Absolutely. We have had so many examples, over so many years, of this extraordinary Gosplan centralism applied to the NHS and to many other public services, in theory delivering the same standard of service across the country but completely failing to do so because the levers are not connected. Perhaps the former Health Secretary would like to come back to the Dispatch Box to explain why it has taken so long for the Department of Health to deliver on this overwhelming public objective, which, after all, came as an initiative from within the Department—from a surgeon who was fed up with fixing the faces of young people who were damaged by knife crime.

Why has it taken so long? The Government launched the tackling knives action programme in June 2008, part of which was to implement data sharing between hospitals and the police. In none of the nine TKAP areas were all A and E departments sharing data in that way, and in three areas—Essex, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire—no A and E departments shared data. Perhaps the Home Secretary would like to tell us why even the areas that were running the scheme did not apply it. There is such an obvious case for the scheme—for public health reasons and the objective that we all share of tackling knife crime.

Will the Home Secretary also tell us why the TKAP programme, despite its success, ran for less than a year before being incorporated into the Home Office's violent crime unit? Surely any solution to knife crime must be a long-term commitment, not a flash in the pan and a headline-grabbing gimmick.

Further evidence, if it were needed, that the Government have not taken knife crime seriously in the past is the failure to collect the relevant statistics. The British crime survey started collecting data from under-16s—a significant group, as victims and perpetrators of knife crime—only since January. Police-recorded crime figures included data specifically on knife crime only from July 2008, even though statistics for hospital admissions show that the problem has been escalating for several years.

The Government have consistently failed, on almost every count, to take opportunities to tackle head on the problem of rising knife crime. Meanwhile, the public debate about tackling knife crime between the Government and the official Opposition still revolves around tougher punishment. We had confirmation of that today. The Conservatives believe that the current system lets people off too lightly and that anyone convicted of possessing a knife should expect a custodial sentence. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) confirmed that in his speech—it was not in the motion. The right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) has said:

"If you are carrying a knife and you are caught, you should expect to go to prison. Plain, simple, clear."

However, the official Opposition have obviously not done their sums. Based on the annual cost of imprisoning somebody, the number of extra prison places that would be needed and the estimated number of new prisoners as a result of the policy, we calculate that they are looking at a cost of £4.9 billion a year. The policy, from a party that has pledged to cut all sorts of taxes in a recession—corporation tax, inheritance tax, VAT, national insurance temporarily, stamp duty—would be the equivalent of adding a penny on the basic rate of income tax. If the official Opposition would not pay for it through a tax rise, will the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell tell us how they would fund it? He is not attempting to rise to provide some explanation.

Putting the policy's questionable arithmetic aside, it also ignores the evidence that tougher penalties are far less effective as a deterrent than catching more criminals. A Home Office-commissioned study on sentence severity, which leading criminologists conducted, concluded that there is

"no firm evidence regarding the extent to which raising severities of punishment would enhance deterrence of crime".

We already lock up more people per head of the population than any other EU country except Luxembourg.

Knife crime is perpetrated primarily by young men, yet the reoffending rate for a young man serving a first custodial sentence is 92 per cent.

David T.C. Davies: I am sure that everyone is getting a sense of déjà vu at such exchanges, but the hon. Gentleman clearly knows that young men serving their first sentence are almost invariably given a short sentence and released less than halfway through it. That is why the reoffending rate is so high. If they were given a meaningful term, they would be much less likely to reoffend.

Chris Huhne: The hon. Gentleman assumes that if something does not work, it will begin to work if there is twice as much of it. A much more common-sense approach is to assume that, if a short sentence given to a young man leads to a 92 per cent. reoffending rate, it would be better to try alternatives, particularly since short sentences are given for relatively trivial offences. There was one thing that I entirely agreed with in the speech by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell, which was his point about the need to head young people off—young men in particular—and stop them getting involved in a life of crime.

Mr. Malins: I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument about reoffending, but in one way the situation is even worse. The figures vary from age to age, but the statistics show that somewhere between 70 and 90 per cent. of young people on release reoffend, which means that they reoffend up to 4.5 times on average in one year. However, he will realise that, because only about one in seven crimes is detected, that figure probably means that a young man on release will have reoffended up to 30 times in one year, so we are talking about reoffending not just once, but many times.

Chris Huhne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point, which emphasises the need to try alternatives to short custodial sentences—alternatives that do not involve educating young men in skills that we do not want them to acquire, and at an extremely high cost to the taxpayer. That is why I find so unsatisfactory the knee-jerk reaction of those on the Labour and Conservative Benches whenever there is a problem—"Lock them up for longer and throw away the key," which flies in the face of the evidence of what works.

Ms Abbott: More than 25 years ago, I was a career civil servant in the prison department in the Home Office, working on criminal justice policy. Twenty-five years ago, when sentences were longer, the reconviction rates were the same. All things being equal, young people are much more likely to reoffend if they are given a custodial sentence. The experts have known that for a quarter of a century. When are we as politicians going to move away from the knee-jerk reactions of the tabloid press and deal with what works?

Chris Huhne: I very much agree with the hon. Lady and congratulate her on her excellent sound effects earlier in the debate. I certainly agree that criminalising a generation of young people who have become involved in knife crime, rather than addressing the reason why they become involved—exclusion from school, fear, peer pressure, gang membership, social deprivation and poverty or family breakdown, to name but a few—does the young people of this country a great disservice.

What we need, in addition to more effective stop and search and the wider implementation of the Cardiff model, is an end to the blanket criminalisation of young people. Of course those convicted of serious and violent crimes need to be dealt with proportionately, but we need to stop young people turning to crime in the first place and help those who stray into it to get back on the right track. Preventive programmes, such as a youth volunteer force, should be created to give kids something to do and to provide skills for later life. There should be more youth facilities to stop the devil making work for idle hands. There should also be more dedicated youth workers in safer neighbourhood teams and an effort by schools not only to identify kids at risk of being sucked into gangs at a young age, but to contact and enrol their parents in the fight to stop that happening.

For those who are beginning to commit low-level offences, acceptable behaviour contracts and positive behaviour orders should be used, which, unlike antisocial behaviour orders and curfews, require offenders to take responsibility for making amends for their actions without criminalising them unnecessarily. Custodial sentences are of course necessary for serious and serial criminals, but they should be the last resort, not the first.

That is a major point of difference between us and the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell, who talked about the presumption of a custodial sentence for carrying a knife. It is already possible to send someone to jail for four years for carrying a knife, but we cannot punish anyone unless we catch them first. What is needed to tackle knife crime is a lot less posturing about punishments and a lot more catching criminals by using the obvious tools that we have to hand. Labour cannot change its policies and the Conservatives have barely scratched the surface of what needs to be done.

Justine Greening: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's comment that so little is being done. Presumably he is aware of Operation Blunt Two in London. In the past year, more than 2 million people have been stopped, 10,000 arrests have been made—a rate of one every 51 minutes—and 25,500 knives have been seized. There has been a 30 per cent. fall in serious stabbings, and 90 per cent. of those caught in possession of a knife have been charged. Is that a good performance?

Chris Huhne: I began my speech, as I hope the hon. Lady recognises, by citing the fact that there has been a fall in knife crime and that the problem is being tackled. I find it distressing, however, that some of the easiest hits on getting knife crime down are being missed, particularly the application of the Cardiff model. We know that that model has reduced the number of people being admitted to hospital with knife wounds by 40 per cent. in the areas in which it has been applied. That is potentially a very dramatic gain, and we ought to be making it a serious, top-rate public priority to ensure that it happens. I do not get a sense of urgency, either today from the new Home Secretary or from his Department and its officials; nor is there an acknowledgement that this is an easy hit that could provide real action very quickly.

We will support the Opposition motion today because its emphasis is right, but we believe that the Liberal Democrats are the only party that is able to take a targeted and effective approach to knife crime that will really work.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I say to the House that as about seven hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, that suggests a tariff of about 15 minutes? Perhaps each person who is called will bear that in mind.

5.1 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I will certainly bear that in mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although I know that your request was not directed only at me. My speeches can be quite brief on occasions of this kind.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne). He and the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) gave evidence to the Select Committee and they can take credit for the recommendations that we made in respect of knife crime. I also want to reiterate my welcome to the Home Secretary. If every debate on Home Affairs issues is as consensual as this one, they will be extremely boring for the public, who expect them to be extremely robust. We

[Keith Vaz]

will take this one as an exception, however. I perceive in this debate a willingness on the part of all the political parties to work together to ensure that we rise above party politics to find a long-term solution to the problem of knife crime that is affecting this country.

The motion tabled by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell is one that I can gladly vote for. I know that the Government have tabled an amendment to it, but I hope that when the Minister winds up the debate, he will tell us that the Government will not vote against the Conservative motion. It would be good to send a message to the public that on some issues—not all, by any means—we can be united in our hope to deal with a major problem.

I also want to place on record my appreciation of the work of the previous Home Secretary. It is in the nature of democratic politics that we do not get to say goodbye before people go, even though the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell tried to say goodbye to my right hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith) the last time she was here—

Chris Grayling: She was saying nothing.

Keith Vaz: Indeed.

In my view, my right hon. Friend was a first-class Home Secretary, certainly as far as the Select Committee was concerned. Whenever we asked her to give evidence to us, she readily did so. She was always available to provide us with information, and I hope that the new Home Secretary will take the same position. I know that the Select Committee is seeking an early meeting with him; we have given him some dates to consider.

I also want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), formerly a Minister of State at the Home Office. He has now left the Department and gone to one with which, as a former schoolteacher, he has a kinship. He is the son of policeman, so obviously having the job of policing Minister was good for him, but he has now gone off to be the Minister with responsibility for children and schools. I wish him well. He, too, was very willing to work with the Select Committee.

I welcome the Minister of State, Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), to his new position. I have known him for many years in the House and I wish him well. He has a tough job. He will find the Select Committee very robust with him. He has just left the Ministry of Justice with the Sonnex case ringing in his ears. As I say, he can expect us to be very strong with him over ensuring that there is a proper joined-up criminal justice system. As someone who has come from the Ministry of Justice, he will understand the need to ensure that it is seamless. I do not blame him for what happened in the Sonnex case, although until last week he was the Minister responsible for probation. We hope that he will keep a close eye on what is happening in the Home Office.

All Members were right to mention the massive concern among the public and in the media about knife crime. We tend to react to high-profile cases, which is why the Select Committee felt it important to ensure that we did not produce our report too quickly; we wanted to bring together all the stakeholders, including the Opposition parties, the voluntary sector, the Government, the NHS and so forth—so that together we could try to fashion a number of recommendations that would be readily accepted by all political parties.

I did not intervene when the Home Secretary was presenting statistics, but I do not absolutely share his rosy view that knife crime has disappeared. There are, of course, trends showing that knife crime has reduced, but the headline figures are still very worrying indeed. Knife homicides increased by 26.9 per cent. between 2005 and 2007, and there were a total of 270 knife murders in 2007-08—the highest since the homicide index was invented in 1977. Knives were used in 6 per cent. of the British crime survey's violent incidents in 2007 and in approximately 138,000 robberies, woundings or assaults.

Although there was a bit of banter about the hospital statistics, the fact is that the number of patients admitted to hospitals after stab wounds rose by 48 per cent. The total number of admissions to A and E—5,239—may seem relatively small, but the percentage increase causes us a great deal of worry. That is why the Select Committee fully accepted the Liberal Democrat viewpoint when the hon. Member for Eastleigh gave evidence: it is no good Manchester producing those figures and Leicester not producing them; they should be readily available to all the agencies that seek to deal with this important matter. Whether or not that amounts to central control, or central diktat, we need those figures if we are to get a clear picture of what is happening.

It is, of course, the victims about whom we should be primarily concerned. If any criticism of the Select Committee report could be made—and I make it as its Chairman—it is probably that we did not spend enough time talking to the victims. It is in practical terms difficult to do, because there are so many of them, so we concentrated on those who had entered the public domain and the people who were prepared to come and talk to the Committee about their own personal experiences. It is important to highlight the necessity to provide as much information as possible to the victims during the processes of the criminal justice system. If we do that, we will be much stronger in dealing with the overall causes of knife crime.

What are the causes? I know that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell was not overly taken by our description of an "arms race". He pointed out that the vast majority of young people do not go around carrying knives; only a small proportion carry them, but the damage they do is profound. The Select Committee used the term "arms race" because we thought it an appropriate description of why young people decided to carry knives. A survey conducted by the OCJS—Offending, Crime and Justice Survey—showed that 85 per cent. of knife carriers in 2006 said that they carried their knives for protection. In other words, the only reason why they were carrying knives was that they felt that someone else was doing so, so they must protect themselves.

That means that there is a real problem with those who are supposed to protect young people: parents, the state—through the police—community services and, indeed, schools. We concluded that those four agencies were primarily responsible for ensuring that young people were protected, and that their failure, either individually or collectively, had led to an increase in the level of

knife carrying. Someone who carries a knife and is in a situation of violence is likely to use that knife; that, in my view, is the reason for the problem of knife crime.

Justine Greening: Is not another, perhaps longer-term, problem the fact that such people are growing up with the sense that they are on their own and must fend for themselves in society? The first time they need practical help from others in the community—people in authority, people who may be older than they are—they often find that it is not there, which conveys a very bad message to them. They tell themselves, "I'm going to have to take care of myself."

Keith Vaz: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the problems that young people encounter when they are on their own and feel isolated. They feel that they have to carry knives because that is the only way in which they can protect themselves.

Let us think about those four agencies. Parents must ask their children where they are going and what they are doing. I think it was the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies), a member of the Select Committee, who raised the issue of parental responsibility. Parents do have that responsibility. My children are aged 14 and 12. I ask them—not as often as I should—where they are and what they are doing, and I ask them to keep in touch with me if they are going out with friends. That is something that all parents need to do.

As our report states, the Committee found that the majority of knives carried by young people—34 per cent.—were kitchen knives from the family home. We do not expect parents to go around counting the kitchen knives every time their kids go out, but an awareness that the knives may well come from the home should be enough to get them thinking. The report also contains a paragraph on the importance of parents' awareness of what video games their children are watching. I know that I have raised this issue in the House on a number of occasions. We feared that violent DVDs and video games contributed to the problem to some extent, because those who were predisposed to violence would be affected by very violent video games.

As for the police and other agencies, we believed that the initiatives on which the Government had embarked were important. As we have heard from both the present and the previous Home Secretary, a huge amount of money is involved. We did not feel that the "tackling knife crime" initiative had been around for long enough for us to say definitively whether it had been a success, and I welcome what the Home Secretary has said about the need for a review after a year. I am glad that he is getting all the stakeholders together. We would like to be very much a part of that—or we would like the Home Secretary to be very much a part of what the Select Committee is proposing to do. However, we consider it important for the various initiatives not to be duplicated. We feel that they should follow each other carefully and not be taken in isolation, because otherwise the problem will arise of spending money without knowing precisely what it is being spent on.

Let me now say something about schools. I am glad that we have been joined by the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell). I believe it was his idea that one of his constituents, Mrs. Ann Oakes-Odger, should give evidence to the Select Committee. She produced some very interesting evidence about work that she had done with Essex police. A short film was made by another organisation, the UNCUT project in Leeds. These are examples of local good practice that should be followed in other parts of the country. We felt that there needed to be early intervention. This has to be done at primary school level; it is too late by the time children go to secondary school. That is why we felt that all year 7 schoolchildren should be asked to participate in an assembly or lesson dealing with the issue of knife crime.

We received some very impressive evidence of what the police are doing, especially in Scotland. We have to give young people alternatives to violence, and some of the schemes we heard about led to a reduction in knife crime. We were particularly taken by a scheme in Glasgow. As well as being the agency that tries to discover whether young people are carrying knives, the police are the best agency to prevent knife crime. We shall want to return to this issue, because the prevention of knife crime is the most important aspect of any discussion of the wider subject.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): May I put on record the fact that Mrs. Ann Oakes-Odger, whom the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, is dedicated to tackling the curse of knife crime because her son was killed by people wielding knives? She is now devoting her life to ensuring that others do not experience what she had to experience.

Keith Vaz: I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I wish to express my gratitude to him for ensuring that Mrs. Ann Oakes-Odger gave evidence to the Committee. It is terrible experiences such as hers and that of the widow of Philip Lawrence that drive people to come forward, because there is nothing they can do to bring their loved ones back but they can put up ideas and fashion thoughts as to how we can proceed. We are very grateful for all the work done by the hon. Members for Monmouth and for Colchester, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) and the other Committee members.

Mr. Crabb *rose—*

Keith Vaz: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am now nearing your 15-minute time limit on speeches so I shall conclude shortly, but first I shall allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene.

Mr. Crabb: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. His Committee's report is a very good and important document, and the subject of gangs is one of the most important areas it covers. Does he think that the Committee should return to this area in greater depth, because some of the statistics we have heard in the debate suggest that the growth in knife-related incidents in the last three or four years is a direct result of the increase in gang activity?

Keith Vaz: We certainly will return to this subject. We received evidence from young people—some as young as seven—who were a part of gangs and who said they were being used as caddies to carry knives for older children. The nature of gang culture makes it possible that knife crime will increase even further.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): It has been a pleasure to serve, with colleagues from both sides of the House, on the Select Committee. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as we recognised in our deliberations, there is a danger of demonising all gangs, and that gangs per se do not lead to an increase in knife crime? Instead, what happens is entirely dependent on the activities of the gang, and on whether a knife has become almost a fashion icon, before moving on to become something much more insidious and dangerous.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to him because the Committee was initially keen to produce a quick study and report on knife crime following a recent spate of knife attacks in London, but he said that the report needed to be much longer and more in-depth, and should examine a wide variety of issues.

What my hon. Friend says about gang-related violence is right. We are not here to demonise gangs. I am sure that the Scouts would not want to regard themselves as a gang. You may well have been a scout, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was not one, but I know that the hon. Member for Colchester was. The Scouts gave evidence to the Committee, telling us that it is important to provide purposeful activities for young men—and, in the context of the Girl Guides, for young girls—to undertake.

In conclusion, the top few things that I would like the Government to do—the new Minister may announce all this at the Dispatch Box in his reply; who knows?—are as follows: ensure better data sharing about knife violence at a local level; implement the Select Committee's domestic violence recommendations from 2008; ban violent video games and DVDs in young offender institutions; and provide early intervention. Those are just four of the points that the Committee made in its detailed report.

I would also like better activities to be provided for young people to ensure that they are engaged in constructive, rather than destructive, activities. The Committee looks forward to the Government's response; we know that we published our report only last week, but I am sure that the Minister will respond within the due time. We will continue this conversation with the Government and we want to continue it with the Opposition too, because only by working together can we have a set of policies to which all stakeholders will be able to sign up. Let us keep the party politics out of this and ensure that the House of Commons is united in dealing with this terrible form of crime.

5.21 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) on the way in which he introduced this motion from the Front Bench in a very thoughtful speech. I also thought that the Home Secretary's first foray from the Dispatch Box in his new role was very thoughtful. He is clearly concerned and interested, and he listens to arguments. I look forward to his period as Home Secretary, although I hope it is not as long as perhaps he hopes it will be.

I also congratulate the Select Committee on Home Affairs, whose report I read with interest. I should say how much I agreed when the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) said, at the end of his contribution, words to the effect that the House should try to unite on some of these difficult issues and put its best constructive views.

I have spoken about crime and knife crime for what seems like many hours in this Chamber over the past few years. I have spoken in Committee for what seems like many days or many weeks on the same subject; I well remember the Violent Crime Reduction Bill being discussed, day after day, in Committee in 2005, and knife crime featured heavily in our debates. I managed to obtain figures showing that at that time some 60,000 children in our country admitted to carrying a knife, for either defensive or offensive purposes—a truly horrifying statistic.

I have also spoken in this Chamber about the very real fear that I have seen on the faces of witnesses in court who are forced to relive a moment of terror when a knife was waved at them; it is a truly horrifying experience. All through these years I have wondered what we can do to reduce this awful crime, which puts so much fear into so many people and which blights so many of our inner-city areas. I was, therefore, pleased to see that the motion talks about tackling the problem and about solutions.

May I be forgiven for putting forward some of my own solutions to the House for a few minutes? They apply not only to knife crime, but to crime in general and to young people in particular—mostly it is young men who carry knives. I shall start with a statistic and ask whether we are getting value for money.

Let us assume that we put a young man away in Feltham remand centre for carrying a knife. The average cost of a place in a young offenders institution is £32,800 a year—a lot of money.

David T.C. Davies: Would my hon. Friend not acknowledge that the net cost to the taxpayer is considerably less than that, because that young man would probably be on benefits anyway?

Mr. Malins: My hon. Friend makes his own point. Given net and gross costs, maybe so, but I simply remark on the fact that while that young man is in the young offenders institution, it costs the taxpayer £32,800 a year to look after him.

David T.C. Davies: Perhaps I did not get the point across. It is obviously not costing the taxpayer that much, because the taxpayer is not paying for him to receive benefits while he is in prison.

Mr. Malins: Yes, and of course my hon. Friend may say that while the young man is in custody, he is not committing crimes outside. I much look forward to hearing his speech on that point. I merely point out that Government figures show that £32,800 is the average cost. Yet we know that when the young man comes out, he will offend. There is a 70 to 80 per cent. chance of his reoffending four or five times officially, and perhaps 25 to 30 times in fact, in one year. My first question, therefore, is whether we are getting value for money from our young offender custodial estate, and my answer is no.

Let us go back to the time before that young man was put into the custodial estate. Who is he? Where is he from? What is the problem? I have come to the conclusion

that there is a great link between crime and school exclusion, and between school exclusion and literacy. An important inspection report in 2004 told us that 83 per cent. of boys under 18 in custody had been excluded from school, and 50 per cent. had been excluded permanently. Why? It was because they had behaved badly. In my judgment—I believe that others share this view—there is a link with literacy. A young man may fall behind in class and begin to behave badly. He cannot keep up, and his behaviour gets worse. He begins to truant, perhaps partly because of the fear of being called stupid or because of embarrassment. He is behind, he is out of school and he has huge literacy problems.

Let us step forward a bit. I have done a trawl around a number of young offenders institutions in the past 12 months, and person after person who runs these places tells me that 80 per cent. of their youngsters aged 15 have the literacy and numeracy levels of an eight-year-old. That is not good news. Although it is not a rule right across the board, there is a link between that and the youngster who gets on badly at school and cannot keep up. He starts to behave badly, has very low literacy and numeracy levels, plays truant, gets excluded, gets permanently excluded, goes out and joins a gang, and does not want to go back to school because he is frightened and embarrassed. It starts off with literacy, which is a big problem.

When I look at our young offenders institutions, I ask, "Well, what are doing about it there? What is actually going on?" Are the youngsters in those institutions getting 20 hours a week of education? No, they are not. Government figures show that at Feltham, they get seven hours' education a week. At Rochester, they get three and a half hours, and at Reading five hours. It is just not enough.

Martin Salter: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Reading and touched on a particular cause of mine, which is the causal link between illiteracy and reoffending. Does he agree that our current reoffending rates are nothing short of a national disgrace? Some 70 per cent. of youngsters on a first-time custodial sentence in young offenders institutions will reoffend within two years. It is utterly ridiculous for the first period of internment to be short and without training.

Mr. Malins: The consensual atmosphere of this debate comes through again, and the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point.

What would I want to happen to that young man who entered a young offenders institution aged 15 or 16? First, I would make a thorough assessment of his literacy and numeracy abilities. An individual plan would be drawn up for him. If, as is probable, he had been statemented earlier in his life, the statement would form part of his papers on admission and would be acted on. I would also ensure, if possible, that he had proper literacy and numeracy education for 25 hours a week, and I would make that compulsory for under-16s in custody.

I am very depressed by Government statistics that tell me that in fact our young man would be locked up for 16 or 17 hours a day out of 24. What kind of a world is this? That means that he is out of his cell for seven hours a day, maximum. How much sport would he play in that time? Never mind pumping weights in the gym for a couple of hours—as has been pointed out, that just makes them stronger and fitter and able to run away faster. Where the devil do team sports come into the picture? I am old-fashioned—I cannot help it—and I believe in team sports. They create self-discipline and teach people to win or lose and to take a knock. I have seen young men playing rugby at Feltham and it has been like a breath of fresh air to see how it improves their characters. Team sport is very good for them, as is pursuing the Duke of Edinburgh awards, but hardly any of that happens in our young offenders institutions. Team sport is a terrific thing to do for a young person and their self-esteem and confidence.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes some interesting points. In north-east Lincolnshire, some excellent work is being done with young men, in getting them to play football, and with young women, getting them into street dancing. This is being done before they offend. Does he agree that such work should be extended across the country so that we can get people to work co-operatively and make use of their energies before they are ever arrested?

Mr. Malins: The hon. Lady makes a good point and I support what she says.

Now I come to a revolutionary idea. I do not think that it is mine—I would be very surprised if it were—and I must have heard it somewhere. In any event, I have written about it and published work on it. I think that sending a young person into custody for anything less than eight months is a total waste of time. I have spoken to many judges about this, and my view is that there is no point in putting a young man into a young offenders institution for anything less than 12 months. If he is in there for only five, six or seven weeks, he lies low, joins a gang, does not do much, comes out and goes straight back where he came from. If the offence is not serious enough to merit 12 months in custody, it should be dealt with in the community. Only in a period of nine to 12 months can we really do some good and turn that young person around.

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I am pleasantly surprised to say that I agree with every word that the hon. Gentleman says, given our previous exchanges in a debate on drugs and alcohol when we did not agree on everything. Does he agree that if we adopted the policy that short sentences should be served in the community, it would relieve some of the pressure on prisons and we could have more training and education in them? In the last Parliament, the Education and Skills Committee's report on prison education found that all the good intentions in adult and young offender institutions were being destroyed because there were not enough prison officers to take people from cells to training areas, and there were so few hours available it was meaningless.

Mr. Malins: Another way of saying that is that if young offenders institutions are going to do real good—there is no point in having one if they are not going to do good—they should do good not just for three or four weeks but all the way through a proper-length sentence.

What about the last three months of the sentence? First, where is the emphasis on resettlement? We should have resettlement wings in all our young offenders institutions into which people who are about to leave

[Mr. Malins]

them should move. The emphasis should be on preparing them and the outside for when they come out. These wings should get the family, the housing and the job ready and should deal with resettlement. There is just not enough emphasis on resettlement.

I commend the intensive fostering programme, which takes place in Hampshire, I think. Families take young offenders on remand as an alternative to custody. I would not mind seeing that extended to young offenders who leave custody. If they leave the custody estate and go back into exactly the same circumstances they were in—where the home and the scene are miserable, where there is no job and where there is no education—they have had it. It is as simple as that. There is not a cat in hell's chance that they will stay straight. Where is the huge emphasis that we must have on proper resettlement so that people go back into education, get themselves into a job and, possibly, get themselves away from the communities in which they have lived so far?

Finally, where are the mentors? Gosh, we should have more mentors in life. I would love to see those in their last three months in a custodial estate for young people being given a permanent mentor who came to see them once a week, tried to help them get a job, filled out their CV and went to interviews with them. We have to make our young offenders institutions places that give a real chance to young people to reform themselves and in every respect to come out better than when they went in. We want them to come out with many more chances than when they went in—chances in education, jobs and hope. Only if we focus on those areas, in my judgment, will we ultimately reduce the incidence of crime among young people and, in particular, the incidence of knife crime.

5.37 pm

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes) (Lab): I appreciate the tone in which the debate has been conducted. It has been very consensual, and that is a refreshing change from some of the partisan debates about crime that we have had in the past, and in which there has been too much point scoring.

My speech today will not be long. I will focus, in particular, on one recent case, which was briefly mentioned by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, and that is the death this week of Claire Wilson in Grimsby. On Sunday afternoon, 21-year-old Claire was walking to work at the Pizza Hut in the centre of Grimsby. She was just doing what people often do. Apparently, she was followed for a short while, and she was stabbed to death in what appears to have been a random attack. Claire lost her life, as did her unborn child—she was seven months pregnant and very excited about the prospect of becoming a mum. Her fiancé, Adam, was also excited.

That case is one of the saddest that I have had to deal with in my years as an MP. It is so, so senseless and shows the sheer horribleness of knife crime. A young woman has lost her life, and the life of her unborn child could not be saved. Her family, friends and neighbours are devastated. The nature of this crime has affected the entire communities of Grimsby and Cleethorpes. A 53-year-old man has been arrested.

Knife crime is not confined to young people. Gang culture and the attempt to stop the arms race among young people are very serious issues, but the case that I have cited shows that knife crime is not committed only by the young.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I merely wanted to say that another horrific case happened in my constituency in Luton a year or two back when John Henry, a policeman, was killed. However, from what my hon. Friend has said, it seems that the person involved in the case to which she has referred was not involved in youth gang culture. Instead, he may have been seriously mentally disordered, because—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that we are going into dangerous territory here. We cannot have a discussion about a particular case, so I counsel the hon. Lady to keep more to generalities.

Shona McIsaac: I appreciate your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was not about to go into details about that particular case. Now that a person has been charged with the crime, I realise that we have to be very careful about how we discuss the nature—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I was fearful that she was going to be tempted down the wrong road by the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins).

Ms Abbott: It has happened before.

Shona McIsaac: Yes, it has happened before.

My constituents are understandably very shocked and saddened by this crime. As I was about to say, it horrifically echoes another case that happened in a nearby constituency. Tina Stevenson was murdered in Hull some four years ago as she walked home from antenatal classes, and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned a similar case in his constituency. When we are dealing with knife crime, we have to look beyond young people and take account of the danger posed by other people using knives on our streets.

People in my community are in a state of shock, and they need to be reassured that the criminal justice system will not let Claire and her family down. Because of this crime, the mood in Grimsby and Cleethorpes is that residents feel that their towns have become lawless. They also feel that they cannot go out: the randomness of the attack means that everyone is more fearful of becoming a victim of crime. That has wiped out a lot of the good work that the police have done in tackling volume crime and antisocial behaviour. Sadly, it has wound the clock back on people's fear of crime, which is often out of kilter with the likelihood of their becoming a victim.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson) is the Minister of State who is here listening to the debate, as he is familiar with the justice system. There is certainly a mood among people at the moment that sentences for knife crimes are far too low. I realise that progress has been made, but people certainly feel that knife crimes are not taken seriously enough.

I want to talk now about a couple of other things, namely the gang culture and young men. I intervened on the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) earlier because it is right to say that far too many of the young men who get sucked into gang culture or who end up in young offender institutions and subsequently prison have atrociously poor literacy and numeracy skills. Because persistent young offenders tend to be given lots of short sentences, we never seem to address their lack of those skills as well as we should.

I know that people want to do more in that regard, but too often it appears that the problem is not addressed and the result is that people coming out of young offender institutions cannot get jobs. The economic climate is not good for anyone, but least of all for people with very poor literacy and numeracy skills. If we are to tackle knife crime at all levels, we must tackle the educational attainment of people in our criminal justice system, particularly young men.

In North East Lincolnshire some phenomenal work is being done by the police with vulnerable young people, such as fair play football, as they call it, for the boys. Points are awarded not just for scoring goals, but if, after a tackle, the players shake hands and make up. That does not sound much, but the sense of fair play, respect for others and working collectively in a team is important in trying to break cycles that have persisted for some time in many of our inner-city communities. The girls are not being ignored. They have been doing dance classes. The work is having a powerful effect on the young people in our area.

It is not just the police who are engaged in such work. One of the neighbourhood watches near where I live has been working with young people in one of the more deprived communities in Cleethorpes. With the young lads, they have been using sports such as football and many other activities to try to break the attraction of gang culture. The desire to belong, which is typical of many young men, makes them want to be part of a gang and leads to many territorial disputes.

The challenge is to make young people feel that they belong to the community in which they live. Some youngsters get the sense from adults that the young people are committing all the antisocial behaviour, so they almost feel rejected by their own community and are seen as bad lads, for example. Adults adopting an inclusive approach towards the young people in their community, which they probably have not always done in the past, is having a powerful effect on those young people.

If any Minister could come up and see examples of such work, I would very much appreciate it. Grimsby-Cleethorpes on the east coast of Britain is a bit of a hike to get to, but some powerful work is being undertaken by the police, neighbourhood watch and voluntary groups to do their best to tackle antisocial behaviour and deal with persistent young offenders.

That is why the loss of Claire in the murder earlier this week is doubly sad. People feel that all that good work has been wiped out and has not had an effect. The communities know that the work is happening, but there is a sense that the town has become lawless. If there is one comment that has been made to me over the past few days, it is, "What on earth has our town come to?" It is very sad that people have had to say that. I hope we get justice for Claire and her family, but our whole community has suffered.

5.48 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I shall be brief, as I know that many other Members want to speak. I am a south-west London MP, and knife crime is an issue that we have felt acutely on our side of the river. Many of us recognise that the problem has been building up for years. Since 2005 it has become more prominent in the press, but that reflects the tip of an iceberg of general youth-on-youth crime. That is the aspect that I shall speak about. It has a much broader impact than we see in the newspapers, where only the unfortunate fatal cases are reported.

A couple of trends have led over recent years to the current situation. First, there is technology. Crime has moved out of the home and on to the street in the past 10 years, so there is now less and less point in breaking into somebody's house to try to lug their plasma TV down the road unnoticed when they have a burglar alarm and all sorts of protection for their property; it is far more effective to steal somebody's iPod, expensive mobile phone or all the portable kit and possessions that people have on them in the street. The people with those possessions are far more likely to be young, and now they end up on the front line of crime in a way that they simply did not 10 or 20 years ago.

Secondly, there is the rise of gangs and the longer-term, associated issues of family breakdown and housing overcrowding, which mean that our young people are out on the streets socialising with one another, when, 10 or 20 years ago, they might have returned to their homes and been up in a bedroom on their own or with a smaller group of friends. We see children socialising in larger groups more now than we ever did. Often, their parents are working, so they are not around to provide as much supervision as I am sure many of them would want to.

We have heard the underlying statistics that go beyond the fatal knife crime statistics that we read about in the papers and hear about in our constituencies from our constituents. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne) set out the statistics on A and E admissions for knife wounds, serious knife wounds and emergencies, and they are staggering. There was a large jump in 2005-06 and the numbers rose in the intervening couple of years, but they have now reached a plateau. Clearly, we are now dealing with an ongoing knife crime problem that will be very stubborn and difficult to reduce in the long term. Nevertheless, we need to do so. I take the point that the hon. Gentleman and other Members made about how we need better to understand and share data about knife possession—whether on knife wounds, from people who turn up at A and E or in schools and in youth provision, when different community stakeholders pick up information about the possession and prevalence of knives among our young people.

I challenge the Minister to refer in his response to the British Crime Survey, which still does not talk to people under 16-years-old. We have seen the rise in the number of younger victims of crime in Britain over the past few years, and the problem goes back to the fact that street crime is focused on young people so much more than it used to be.

I want to talk about a way through, however. A huge amount of work is going on not just in London but throughout Britain, and there are huge opportunities

[Justine Greening]

for young people, meaning that they do not necessarily have to go down the route of crime. It is worth saying that, overwhelmingly, most young people will not get involved in crime but will contribute huge amounts to their communities. On Friday night, I was at the Putney division of the Wandsworth sea cadets, who were having a great time and learning brilliant life skills. I can point to another project in my constituency, the Regenerate project on the Alton estate, which directly tackles youngsters who are more likely to get into crime and knife crime. That is an entirely different project, dealing with different youngsters, but again it is doing fantastic work.

There is a way through the problem, and it involves us all working together. We must agree that, in the short term, initiatives such as Operation Blunt Two in London, are absolutely critical to addressing today's problem. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) talked about the fact that, in the medium term, we need to understand the individual issues that lead people down such paths. In my view, the problem is not caused just by learning difficulties, although that is a big part; much of the problem is caused by aspiration and what young people in some parts of our communities see as success and the route to success. For too many, success in the area where they grow up means climbing the gang hierarchy and being seen to make progress on that route, rather than going into business or being successful in different walks of life. We must ensure that, for our children, wherever they grow up, there are many more visible pathways to success and its acknowledgment.

If there is one idea that we should consider as a community, not just in my constituency, but throughout London and throughout Britain, it is the idea of more volunteering by men. They can be role models for the younger male adults growing up in our communities. Perversely, 80 per cent. of volunteers in Britain are women, but never has there been more need for more men to come forward—whether for the Scouts or for charities such as Regenerate in Roehampton. Male volunteers can give young men, in particular, the benefit of their experience and a sense that one can achieve many more positive outcomes in life by contributing positively in our society and as part of our community than one can by simply climbing the gang hierarchy and leading a parallel life to that which so many other people lead. If we as a House work together and continue to debate these issues constructively, we will achieve something that will be extremely valuable not just to our children growing up today, but, I hope, to their children in the future.

5.56 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am very glad to be able to take part in this important debate, and I congratulate the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), on the excellent report that he has helped to bring to gestation. I am sure that it will fashion and inform our debate for a long time to come.

It is important in such a debate first to stress that the majority of our young people are not caught up in knife crime, gun crime or gang culture. It is easy to get carried away and criminalise young people as a class, inner-city young people as a class and, even, young people of a certain skin shade as a class. I might shock the House to say that one might walk through Hackney and see a group of gangling boys lurking under their hoods and think that they are plotting murder and mayhem, but they might just as well be on their way to play basketball. They will be quite pleased that people are frightened of them, but they will be trotting behind their mother to church on a Sunday. The media encourage us to jump to conclusions about young people, but we should not, so I want to put it on record that, although we have our issues in Hackney, the majority of our young people are not in that criminal sub-culture.

I do not know of many young inner-city men who when shopping up the west end have not been descended on by store detectives, or who have not walked down a street and had women clutch their bags closer to their bodies because they have just assumed that such men are criminals. We have to beware of criminalising our young people in that way. None the less, as a Member for an inner-city area and as a parent, I know that knife crime and the related issues of guns and gangs are very frightening to parents and communities, not least because one can say goodbye to one's child as they go off in the morning to school, college or their first job, and by the evening receive a phone call saying that they have been caught up in an incident—sometimes quite innocently. That is a frightening thing for parents in an inner-city area to live with, because when the gun, gang and knife cultures erupt, they often touch and harm young people who are simply going about their business.

I want to talk about the long-term issues of knife crime, the medium-term things that we as the Government and society can do, and the short-term response that we need from the criminal justice system. Where does the young man, swaggering around an estate with a knife up his sleeve, thinking that he can demand respect with the point of a blade or a gun, come from? I do not believe that he is the result of listening to music or watching video games. I do not believe that the culture produces criminal behaviour; I believe that the criminal sub-culture produces the music and the games.

Where do such young men come from? They come from families, many thousands of them on estates that I represent in Hackney, where young boys are growing up not just in female-headed households—I would be the last person to say that a single parent cannot be a good parent—but in households where they have never seen men getting up and going out to work, and meeting their responsibilities as men; nor have their friends seen that. When they go to school, most of their teachers are women. As they grow up, their notion of manhood is a vacuum. I was fortunate; my family are working-class Jamaicans, but every day that God sent, my father went out to work, and on a Friday he brought home his wage packet. That was my notion, and my brother's notion, of what being a man was all about.

There are too many young children on estates in Hackney who do not have a notion of manhood. They do not see people—men or women—going out to work and meeting their responsibilities. As they grow up, their minds are filled with a notion of manhood that is informed partly by popular culture, yes, but partly also by the guys they see on the street with the big cars and the gold chains. They do not know that those guys will

have a very short "working" life. They do not know about the downside. All that they see is the swagger, the big car, the gold chains, and the notion that that guy is the one whom all the girls are after. Into those boys' imagination comes a notion of manhood that I do not recognise, that people in the House do not recognise, and that my father would not have recognised. That is the notion of manhood to which those boys aspire.

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady makes a really good point. Often, when such people see role models, they are celebrities; they are out of reach. They need to see role models who are within reach, and who have realistic lives that they can achieve and aspire to.

Ms Abbott: That is right. The notion of role models is often misused. It is not a question of pulling in people from outside a community and saying, "Look, you can be him." Young people should be able to see people who are recognisably like them, and recognisably part of their lives—people who are leading the sort of lives that, a few generations ago, inner-city communities took for granted.

As I say, the process starts in the home. When the children I am talking about go to school, increasingly teachers are finding that some of them have not been spoken to. That is a curious thing. When I was growing up in the working-class West Indian community, the one thing that a person could never complain about is people not talking to them; people talked to us the whole time. However, in some of the communities that I am talking about the mothers are watching television or listening to their iPods. When such children attend school for the first time, valuable time is lost just socialising them—teaching them how to use a knife and fork, and how to work co-operatively. That is at the heart of some of the educational failure that we see further down the line.

I believe that the long-term origins of the social dislocation that leads to gangs, guns and knives is in the home. That dislocation starts with young women who, although they may love their children, do not know how to parent them. Their idea of parenting them is having them dressed up in designer clothes from top to toe. When my son was at primary school, he was constantly complaining that the other little children had a lot of expensive designer stuff. Their mothers were on benefit; I was a Member of Parliament. He could not understand why he could not be in designer clothes, but that was the limit of those girls' notion of parenthood.

In the summer holidays, when I took my bus pass—I am not a driver—and took my son to reading schemes in the library, or youth projects in museums, or whatever a person could take a little child to on a bus, I would often find that I was the only ethnic minority parent there. It is not that other minority parents in Hackney do not care for their children, but their notions of being a parent are limited. They perhaps come from cultures where the child would have been brought up collectively by aunties and grannies. Instead, they are isolated on some estate, and the aunties and grannies are not within reach. The parents are thrown back on to their own knowledge, which is limited.

I take the view, I am afraid, that my Government's emphasis on putting single-parent mothers out to work is wrong. Some of those single-parent mothers need first to be taught to be decent parents. Once they have been taught to be decent parents who are at home when their children come home from school, it will be time to talk about sending them out to work to stack shelves.

I have set out some of the issues relating to home life that I believe form some of the rootless, valueless young men who grow up to be involved in gangs and knives. The answer to those problems is long-term; there is no question about that. We have to look at our policies on work, and look at how we support parents. We have to look at how we work with the Churches. I admit that I am not a regular church-goer myself, but often the only bastion of order, values and boundaries in inner-city areas is the Church.

I have set out the sort of home life that some of the young men in question have. Having said that, I can show hon. Members families in Hackney in which one young man will tread the straight and narrow and be a credit to his family, and another will be in gangs. For three years I have run an awards programme for top-achieving black children in London. I remember that in the first year we gave an award to a young boy from Somalia who had been brought up on the Chalk Hill estate, one of the toughest estates in Brent. He had been to state schools, but on leaving state school he was able to go to the university of London's School of Oriental and African Studies and graduated with a first. His brother was a gang member. Having said what I said about home conditions, individuals are individuals, and we should always account for that. I have mentioned family dislocation. We are talking about cultures where, generations ago, children had been brought up by an extended family network, but people now find themselves isolated on estates without that support.

I want to move on to some of the medium-term issues, and I want particularly to focus on education. I was struck by something that a past director general of the Prison Service said: on the day that we permanently exclude a boy from school, we might as well give him a date and time to turn up in prison. I am not saying that educational failure is an excuse for criminality. I am saying that the statistics show a clear link between educational failure and exclusion on the one hand, and criminality on the other. It stands to reason that a boy who is in class studying for his AS-levels is not wandering up and down estates in Hackney doing what he should not be doing.

I have paid a lot of attention to and spent a lot of time on issues of educational failure, and I believe that we have to focus on particular communities in a laser-like way. The danger with some of our education programmes in the inner city is that it is children from the more motivated families—often quite middle-class families—who get on the "gifted and talented" schemes. Quite gifted, intelligent, talented boys get pulled in another direction. Let us remember, some of the boys in gangs may do dreadful things, but they have tremendous qualities of leadership and tremendous skills, and often have tremendous ability. The problem is that we are not intervening early enough to direct that energy and charisma and those leadership skills in the right direction.

For more than a decade I have organised a conference on education; it is called "London Schools and the Black Child". Every year, I get 1,500 black parents and teachers to talk about the issues facing our children. Hon. Members should never believe that inner-city

[Ms Abbott]

parents are not concerned about their children; they are concerned. There is more that we can do to tap that concern and encourage them to understand that the school system is on their side.

As I have said, I also run an award scheme, and the House would be amazed to see the children from some of the toughest estates in London—black children from state schools—who get 10 As at GCSE, and four As at A-level, and who study medicine and go to Russell group universities. As I said right at the beginning of my contribution, knife crime and gangs are a terrible problem, but we should never forget how many of our young people—young black and Asian people—even in the inner cities achieve extraordinary things in the face of adverse circumstances.

I believe that education is key, but this is a home affairs debate. However, I could say more about the need for a teaching work force in London who look like London; the need to recruit more black teachers; the need for more male teachers at primary school level; and the need to target different groups quite specifically, which I mentioned. It is no good talking about ethnic minority children. The needs and the results of a Chinese child who lives above a takeaway, a third-generation West Indian child, a first-generation African child, and a middle-class east African child are very different. Those children perform very differently academically, so I believe in targeted intervention and education.

Finally, I want to talk about the criminal justice response to issues of knife crime. Some Members have mentioned the importance of longer sentences, but what deters the young people involved is the certainty of being caught. The focus on sentencing is a problem as we try to fight against the gangs, guns and knives. It makes the public feel good—"Put them inside and throw away the key. Give them 10 or 20 years." However, the point is not the length of the sentence, but the certainty of being caught.

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and I agree with what she has said. The all-party group on child and youth crime, of which I am a member, is looking into knife crime at the moment. When we spoke to young people, they said to us that it did not matter what sentence they got if they were caught. They felt that they had to carry a knife because they felt safer. The fact that they were then more likely to be the victim of knife crime was irrelevant; they felt safe carrying a knife. Whether the sentence was one year or 20 years made no difference to them. The issue was all about whether or not they felt safe.

Ms Abbott: I agree entirely with that intervention.

I shall draw my remarks to a close. The inter-agency working under Operation Blunt, and its capacity to intervene early, has been important. The use of knife arches and other such measures is also important. Knife crime may involve only a minority of our children, but it strikes fear into the hearts of communities and parents. Education is significant. It is a fallacy that carrying a knife makes someone safer; in fact, it puts them more at risk. We do not need to educate only young people; too many parents allow their children to take knives from home to "defend themselves". The answers are multi-agency working and more education—and, where necessary, measures such as knife arches and targeted stop and search. Those measures are important.

It is wrong to stigmatise a whole class, generation and cohort of young people. However, knife crime is a serious issue and we have to consider the short-term criminal justice measures. It is important for us to do more to protect witnesses and to make it easier for them to be anonymous if they need to be. Recently, I had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Justice about possible changes to the court process to make it easier to ensure that when gang members are caught, they go down. There is no more important disincentive to a gang member than the notion that they will actually go down; the issue is not about the length of the sentence. Criminal justice measures can be taken.

We have had successes as a Government, but knife crime is emblematic of what has gone wrong for a generation of our young people. I do not want to sensationalise the issue, as some of our media do, but nor do I want to underplay it. The Government have done good work, but there is more to be done—particularly, as I have said, in considering the long-term social context of the problem.

6.13 pm

Mr. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate for a few short minutes in this extremely important debate. I commend not only my colleagues on the Front Bench for pressing for it, but all Members who have participated for the tone in which it has been conducted. We have had an extremely useful and constructive discussion about an extremely important issue.

Several Members have already commented on the consensual tone of the debate so far, but the public expect nothing less from us—they are crying out for action on and solutions to this extremely difficult problem. They are sickened and appalled every time they read in the newspapers or see on television reports of the murder of another teenager on the streets of London or of other cities and towns across the UK. That is why they take to the streets and march for action, as we saw last June in London. In September there were more marches in London and in Gourock, near Glasgow in Strathclyde. Members of the public have taken to the streets to campaign on the issue and say that enough is enough. They do not want to live in communities blighted by fear or scarred by street violence. They want to see us in Parliament taking action that will prove effective in the long term.

I should like to make a few brief points. The first relates to the nationwide nature of the problem. Yes, it is true that knife crime is overwhelmingly concentrated in certain urban centres, but the problem is also experienced in many communities that have not traditionally had such crime on their streets. I am thinking particularly of my own community in Pembrokeshire, in rural west Wales. In November 2006, a fine young man—an excellent soldier from the local 14th Signal Regiment—was stabbed to death outside a nightclub in Haverfordwest, in the heart of Pembrokeshire. The community was truly shocked because people have not been used to such crime. It is true that it was a one-off which has not been repeated, but it created enormous shock in the community.

Such an incident encourages a ratchet effect. I do not like the phrase "arms race", which has been mentioned this afternoon, but when young people are seen to start carrying and using knives, fear is created in the community and other young people feel that they have to arm themselves as well if they are to be able to respond to any threats. When knife crime starts to spread out from urban centres and hits communities such as mine in rural west Wales, there is a risk that other young people will be encouraged to become involved.

My second point relates to young women. Yes, the typical carrier of a knife is a young male aged between 15 and 19 living in an urban area, but an increasing number of young women are using and carrying knives and being drawn into gang culture. I saw that for myself when, three years ago, I visited Eastwood Park women's prison with the Welsh Affairs Committee. There I met a young woman who was serving a sentence for taking someone's life by using a knife. The knife crime problem overwhelmingly involves young males, but we should not allow the stereotype to prevent us from looking at all aspects of the problem and recognising that young women are drawn in as well. Such young women have often been victims of horrendous abuse in their earlier lives, and when they get sucked into gang culture they find themselves becoming victims of abuse again.

My third point is about statistics, which have been discussed this afternoon. The Home Affairs Committee report recognises that we still lack data robust enough to enable us to understand the true scale of knife-related crime. There is a paucity of good data about the activity of gangs around the country. If we are to have effective, local solutions, we need better data to be collected by the police, other agencies and third sector organisations that work at the coal face.

Finally, I should like to draw to the attention of my party's Front Benchers and the Minister a report entitled "Dying to belong", which was published recently by the Centre for Social Justice. It is the best survey of the problems of gang crime that I have come across. It was produced by a Centre for Social Justice working group, chaired by Simon Antrobus, chief executive of Clubs for Young People. The working group comprised people from Nacro, academics studying the problem and people working at the coal face. The quality of the group's research on the nature of gang-related crime and possible effective solutions is very high, and I commend the report—along with the Home Affairs Committee report—to the House.

6.19 pm

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): It has been a pleasure to listen to the debate. I am sorry that the House is so empty at the moment, because the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made, without doubt, the best speech of the afternoon; indeed, it was one of the best speeches that I have heard in this place. I am not just saying that. I disagree with some of what she said, and she will disagree with some of what I am going to say—but she knows what she is talking about, this lady. Before she leaves, I want, if I may, to invite myself to talk to her again about these issues, because I am going to mention one of the areas that she talked about—not in her constituency—which I have also visited. She may know that I have worked for some years as a special constable. I have arrested people not only for carrying knives, but more seriously—and, I am thankful to say, more rarely—for carrying guns. I have enjoyed working with her colleague, the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), who has chaired the Home Affairs Committee in a non-partisan way that is reflected in this debate.

Over the past six months I have visited some of the areas in question myself—not dressed as I am now, but wearing a tracksuit, an old pair of trainers and a T-shirt—to try to get a sense of how it feels to live in them and whether the perception of crime is matched by the reality. I am glad to say that I am still here; I was certainly not attacked. However, in at least two of the four more notorious areas of London, I felt very threatened and intimidated by what was going on. I saw groups of young people like those that the hon. Lady mentioned congregating at the side of the road. I watched them going silent and looking at me when I went past, and I kept my eyes to the ground and kept walking in a straight line as though I knew where I was going, which in some cases I did not. Frankly—I am sorry to have to say this—my thought on returning from one of those visits was, "Thank God I don't live in that area and my children don't go to school there." That is just being honest.

Ms Abbott: I see the same groups on my way home, as I live in my constituency. I would say this to the hon. Gentleman: if you were a middle-aged black woman and looked them straight in the eye, you might find that they took a step backwards.

David T.C. Davies: If the hon. Lady looked me straight in the eye in a venomous way, I would probably take a step backwards as well.

Is it the reality that crime is high in these areas, or is it a perception? I do not know, but the numbers of people found carrying knives indicates that there is a serious problem. People have told me about the trainers hung from lamp posts to mark out gang territory, although I did not see that myself. In one community centre, they told me that people were being delivered to the area by car because they were afraid not only to walk but even to use public transport into another postcode district. I am happy to give the hon. Lady exact details about that. There is no doubt that there is a perception among law-abiding people living in those areas that there is a real problem, and the question is: what can we and should we be doing about it?

The hon. Lady talked about her upbringing in what I think she described as a traditional working-class household. I was brought up in a conventional middle-class household, but I recognise most of the values that she talked about because they are the same: bringing up children to say please and thank you, teaching them to eat with a knife and fork, and getting them to understand the importance of education and doing what they are told at school. Those values are universal. My upbringing was conventional and middle class, but that is not the case with many of my family. My mother was a miner's daughter. I remember going into miners welfare institutes, where one would see great books; they would have whole libraries there. What happened to those traditional working-class values of betterment and education, whereby people could go into a miners welfare institute and not just have a couple of pints but read quite intellectual books? That

[David T.C. Davies]

sort of thing seems to have died out somewhere along the way. The problem in many of these areas is not particularly one of deprivation or poverty. One of the problems is the development of an under-class of people who do not seem to share the same values that are universal to so many of us in this Chamber.

Mr. Crabb: My hon. Friend is making an important point. I do not think there is a difference between working-class values and middle-class values. It is not the values that have declined, but the vehicle for transmitting them to young people, which is essentially the family unit: that is where the problem lies.

David T.C. Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend. What I detect in these areas is an irresponsible approach towards family. Far too often, young people think that it is okay to bring children into this world without considering the implications. I am certainly not talking about single mothers, or women in particular—it takes two to tango—or about people who get divorced or whose partners die, or who become pregnant by mistake, which can happen as well. I am talking about people who have no concept of the problems caused by having two, three, four or five children when they are still in their early 20s. Those of us who are parents, as virtually all of us here are, know how difficult it is to bring up children at the best of times.

Walking around those areas, I saw another problem—although the hon. Lady may disagree with this. It was fairly obvious that many of the people living there had probably arrived in the country relatively recently and had not yet integrated. I am not necessarily talking about people who are black or Asian, but just as much about people from eastern Europe. My wife is from eastern Europe, so that is in no way meant to be derogatory. There is a problem when large groups of people who have come from a variety of racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds are all dumped into one particular area, cheek by jowl, without any attempt to integrate them.

Ms Abbott: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. However, I have paid a lot of attention to black boys' educational achievement, and he might be surprised to know that newly arrived African immigrants' boys do significantly better than West Indian boys whose families have been in this country for generations. Time does not allow me to explain why that is.

David T.C. Davies: I recognise that. I am also aware that black boys from Barbados seem to do much better than those from Jamaica. It is a complicated issue. That makes me wonder whether the question of family structures and strong family values is not more important. My wife is the daughter of an east European farm labourer. She was brought up on an estate of grim tower blocks in southern Hungary—her parents still live on it—but walking around there one sees no problems whatsoever. In that part of the world there are strong family structures and a strong sense of community and homogeneity, so there are not problems of the sort that we see in some parts of inner-city London. I am struggling to find the answers, but I do not think that the problem is one of poverty: the lack of social cohesion is part of it, as is the lack of family structures.

We have heard about role models. Why is it that all too often, black youth growing up have as a role model somebody they have seen on MTV driving around in a fast expensive car? What happened to the black role models who run churches and youth groups? Why are they not looking up to people like that?

These are important questions, and they will not be answered today; it will take many decades to sort them out. However, there are things that we could be doing, and the Home Affairs Committee report has drawn attention to a few of them. We heard earlier from Liberal Democrat Members that one of the greatest disincentives to carrying a knife is the fear of being caught. That makes me wonder why they, more than anyone else, have opposed measures to allow the police to stop and search young people in areas where there is a particular problem.

The Government—for all that I criticise them, quite rightly on many occasions—have been trying their utmost to tackle this problem. They have been moving in the right direction, but there is more that they could do. For example, it is ludicrous that if the police stop somebody for carrying out a minor offence that will not lead to an arrest, and they discover, or already know, that that person has recent convictions or a propensity to carry knives, they cannot immediately carry out a simple stop and search because they must have the evidence that the person has a knife on them at that moment, which they will not have unless someone has seen it, or can see the handle sticking out of the person's pocket. That situation is ludicrous, and I hope that the Government will think about changing it. However, they have made it easier to bring in section 60 orders, which allow stop and search to be carried out.

It was suggested earlier that a young person who is excluded from school might as well be told when they can turn up to prison. I do not accept that. There are good projects taking place in the inner cities: for example, the London boxing academy in Haringey, which young people who have been excluded from school are strongly encouraged to join. When they are in that placement, they get a couple of hours of sport every day, as well as learning. They are taught by qualified teachers and have mentors who are former boxers and can therefore maintain a sense of discipline that might be lacking in other places. The pilot project has been successful; we could do with many more such projects in inner cities to reach people before they get as far as prison or a young offenders institution.

I agree with most hon. Members that short sentences are a waste of time. They carry no incentive to behave and, as others have pointed out, little is done with people who go to prison or a young offenders institution for a short time. A Faustian pact seems to be made, whereby the prison officers allow offenders to have a relatively comfortable time, provided that the offenders give the officers no trouble. That is simply not good enough. We must get people into a routine in which they get exercise, education—basic literacy and numeracy—and basic vocational skills. That cannot be done in a short time—it takes at least one or two years. Instead of saying, "Let's not put people in prison if it's going to be for a short time; let's give them community sentences instead," we should say, "We've got people here who have transgressed, and who will go on transgressing. Put them in prison, by all means—but not into a prison

that's just a Victorian cage with an iron door and bars on the windows." They should not be left in such places, but, once the punishment element of their sentence has been served—if the offence is minor, perhaps that element is not needed—they should be put into a college surrounded by walls. Rather than roaming the streets, they should be forced to learn and get the basic numeracy and literacy skills that they need, and we should tell them that they will not be allowed out until they have got those skills, but that they can come out much earlier if they do acquire them.

Keith Vaz: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work on the report. He is picking up a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made. Prison does not always work—the Minister of State, Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), is, of course, a former prisons Minister—and we must consider alternatives because the reoffending rate is so high. The hon. Gentleman is basically saying, "Incarcerate"—that is, punish—"but make sure that people use their time productively so that they don't come out and reoffend."

David T.C. Davies: That is exactly what I am saying. I do not believe that community sentences work, having seen them in action. Even when I went to see such a scheme as a Member of Parliament, no semblance of order could be maintained. At the scheme I visited in Gwent, people were cursing and swearing at the leaders in front of me. I remember one young offender turning round to one of the people supposedly keeping order and demanding, in language I will not use, "Where are my blinking chips?" He had not had his fish and chips, and she went off and got them for him because he did not want to queue. That is what goes on in a community sentencing scheme.

Chris Huhne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T.C. Davies: Yes, I am happy to give way, though the hon. Gentleman had plenty of time earlier.

Chris Huhne: I was tempted to intervene earlier, when the hon. Gentleman traduced Liberal Democrat policy on stop and search. However, it is obvious that community sentencing will not be effective unless it is properly supervised, and we need a probation service that does that. Surely that is a more sensible way of spending taxpayers' money than short-term custodial sentences. There seems to be general agreement between hon. Members of all parties that they are ineffective, lead to high reoffending rates and can be counter-productive if, those serving them learn skills that we do not want them to have.

David T.C. Davies: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would be right if people were able to keep order on such schemes, but they are not. People never will be able to do that, because of all the human rights legislation and so on. When we talk to people who run those schemes, we hear about those who do not want to do community service because it is raining and they will get wet, and those who do not want to wear their orange tabards because they feel that it is against their human rights. There is no one in the probation service who is prepared to lay down the law and say, "You will go out there and do this; otherwise you're going straight back to prison." When we talk to those young people, we find that they do not want to go to prison. Prison is seen as much worse than community sentences. Defence barristers never say, "M'lud, please don't give him a community sentence, it'll be far too tough—please send my client to prison instead." When defence briefs start making such pleas, I will start believing that community sentences are a worthwhile deterrent.

Earlier, the hon. Gentleman said that catching people was the best incentive. One reason for the police's inability to catch people is that the criminals are all out on the streets. If we took some of the worst ones off the streets and kept them in prison for a while, the police could start concentrating on the rest. Resources are currently spread too thinly.

Chris Huhne: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T.C. Davies: I will not, because I was told to speak for only 15 minutes.

I have heard more common sense from Labour Members than I expected, though the Government could do much more. I heard the Minister, in a previous role, speaking on "Analysis" on Radio 4. He spoke well and the BBC did not do him justice in that programme, because it did not accept the point about the worthiness of prison.

I look forward to working with the Home Secretary—although I do not know how long he will be Home Secretary; the public may have other ideas shortly, as he may. He may apply for a new job in Government. However, I will work with anyone who wants to tackle the menace of crime. I particularly hope that the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington will allow some of us who have an interest to take up her offer of seeing what is happening in her constituency because we could all learn a lot from her.

6.36 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary to his new position—I am sorry that he is not here to hear that—and the consensual approach that he took to the Opposition motion by tabling an addendum to it rather than trying to amend it or strike it out. That emphasises the need to come together to look for common solutions to a problem that affects so many of our communities throughout the country.

I also welcome the new Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), to his post. He and I have debated similar issues previously, albeit in the TV or radio studios. I therefore look forward to robust and detailed debate across the Dispatch Box so that we can ascertain where there is common ground and where there is difference between us.

I also send my best wishes to the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker). I will miss our exchanges. Despite our differences, he always showed passion and genuine personal commitment to the important matters that we are considering. I wish him well in his new post in the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

[James Brokenshire]

The scourge of knife crime has touched too many families and communities across the country. In 2007-08, some 270 people were stabbed to death with a sharp or pointed instrument. As we have heard, that is the highest total since records on homicide started to be collected in 1977. It is important to note that the proportion of homicides in which a knife is used has risen to more than a third of all homicides. The Home Affairs Committee's report made that point.

Sir Igor Judge, the president of the High Court Queen's bench, made a clear and powerful statement on the current disturbing situation last year when he noted:

"Offences of this kind have recently escalated. They are reaching epidemic proportions. Every knife or weapon carried on the street represents a danger and, therefore, in the public interest, this crime must be confronted and stopped."

The costs are not simply social and personal. The youth organisation, Kids Count, estimates that knife crime costs the state approximately £1.25 billion a year. I commend Kids Count for its work in giving young people a voice and for its awards, which recognise inspiration, good practice and good organisations that do tremendous work at the coal face.

When one talks to people who have been directly affected by the appalling incidents, one is humbled by the strength of character and resolve of so many of those who have lost loved ones. Their determination to ensure that some good should come out of the appalling tragedies that they have suffered and that long-term change should be achieved to prevent more lives from being cut short is powerful. We all have a duty in this House to make good on those families' expectations, for the benefit of society as a whole and the next generation in particular.

This has been a well-informed, wide-ranging and interesting debate. The tone of this debate and the manner in which it has been conducted reflects well on this House, which has come in for a lot of criticism for the way in which we debate such issues. However, today's debate highlights the House at its best. Now that he is in his place again, I commend the Home Secretary for his initial comments and for the constructive way in which he has sought to engage with the debate and set out some of his initial thoughts on how he will approach the issues.

It will be interesting for Conservative Members to see how the Home Secretary's thoughts develop and, in particular, how he intends to take forward programmes such as the youth crime action plan. How will it be delivered and what responsibilities will it be given? At the moment, various different agencies, organisations and Departments are involved in the project, but if it is to have an effect, its implementation will need to be pushed hard. We will look closely at how that works, how developments such as the safer schools partnerships, which we think are valuable and important ideas, are pursued and how the Home Secretary deals with some of the points that have rightly been raised about the sharing of data and information to ensure that more informed, effective and targeted approaches are taken to deal with the offences being committed.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) and his Committee for producing an extremely good report, which provides a framework for this afternoon's deliberations. He raised a number of extremely important points about the need for long-term solutions. Some short-term wins may have been highlighted—the use of stop and search, Operation Blunt Two here in London and the work of the Mayor of London—but I am under no illusions. The problem appears to be persistent, and, although some short-term benefits may come from the enforcement strategy, we should not kid ourselves that the job is done. So many entrenched social issues lie behind the problem that we need strategies that deliver in the short, medium and long term. The Home Affairs Committee report does justice to that need—that aspiration, that requirement—if we are to achieve what our communities and our society need us to achieve in dealing with this intractable and difficult problem.

Keith Vaz: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. That is why it is important that the dialogue should continue and not be based just on a debate of this kind. The relationship that has been built up between the parties on the issue has to continue if we are to find a long-term solution to the problem. Knives will always be with us. So long as they remain in the kitchen and people need them to eat their meals, they will always be there. We need to keep the dialogue going.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we need an informed debate. He will remember the debate on knife crime in this Chamber 12 months ago, in which we both took part. He said then that he felt that the debate was consensual, that there was common ground and that there were issues on which we had agreement across the House. We need to focus on those areas where we can seek agreement. At the same time, however, there will be differences. We will not shrink from being critical or from highlighting failures or those areas where the approaches taken are not effective. It will be important to have a constructive dialogue and debate about such matters.

The right hon. Gentleman raised in his report the important point about how we need an informed and considered approach to the issues and about how, sadly, the knives out on the streets largely come from the kitchen. The previous focus was on knife amnesties—he will remember the almost annual pictures of the knives handed in to police stations—but they had the wrong emphasis, because the knives largely came from the kitchen drawer, as his report rightly highlighted. Indeed, that was also the feedback that we received from the police.

We also need to focus on some of the implications of violent video games and DVDs and the factors that might lead somebody down the path of committing violent crime. That will become more challenging. One issue that I am focused on is the move from traditional media to the internet and what that may mean for the ability to regulate and give parents the right signposting about the material and information being used. That issue will become more complicated.

The insights into the criminal justice system and the role of young offender institutions that my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) shared with us were very important. I am struck by the fact that some perverse incentives exist for local authorities, whereby it is almost cheaper for them to have someone in a youth

offender institution than it is for them to make some of the interventions or do some of the practical work in the community that might stop a young person ending up in that situation. We need to focus clearly on that.

I do not think that anyone in the Chamber can have failed to be moved by the comments that the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) made about the appalling case of Claire Wilson, the 21-year-old mother-to-be who was stabbed to death, and about the impact that it has had on the community in the hon. Lady's constituency. I am sure that everyone in the House would wish to pass on their best wishes and respects to Miss Wilson's friends and family and to all those who have been directly affected by that appalling incident.

Equally, the hon. Lady highlighted the fact that we must not lose sight of the good community work being done across the country. I pay tribute to those working in her constituency and to those, as we have heard, working in constituencies across the country. Sporting activity can be used as a way of engaging young people, not simply by giving them something positive to do, but by being a catalyst to leverage in positive things such as education, self-respect and self-esteem, which can make a long-lasting difference.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) has had a long-standing interest in combating gangs and the postcode approach. Young people are being robbed on the street because of their possessions. She also made an important point about how the British crime survey has only belatedly taken the under-16s into account.

The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made a powerful contribution about how we should not treat young people as an amorphous group. I had a discussion with about 200 young people that was organised by the YMCA. One young person posed this question to me: "If you saw a group of older people out on the street, would you describe them as a gang?" That young person was trying to articulate the fact that people are grouped too readily. We should look at young people as individuals and try to see the challenges and issues that they face, rather than trying to say that all young people are bad or writing people off. The points that the hon. Lady made were very powerful.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb) that we need a measured debate. Knife crime is not something that we should see as being confined simply to inner-city areas; rather, it is more wide ranging. I have read the Centre for Social Justice report in detail and have met colleagues as well.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): We are talking mainly about gangs and knife crime this afternoon, but in my constituency—the quiet backwater of East Devon—we had a terrible incident in Sidmouth involving somebody with a samurai sword. There followed a big campaign against samurai swords, although I thought that it did not go far enough in addressing the culture of knife crime. Will my hon. Friend take into account the fact that the problem affects individuals in more remote locations, as well as urban and inner-city gangs?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes his point well, and I am sure that we will all reflect on how the issue touches so many different communities.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) gave his insight, as a special constable, into knife crime and the use of stop and search. We have proposed some amendments to stop-and-search powers to give greater discretion to community sergeants at the heart of safety neighbourhood teams. We need to focus on that issue to develop it further.

This has been a good, constructive debate. We look forward to continuing to engage with the Government on the issue, but as I have said, we will hold them to account if they fall short on the aspirations of our communities.

6.49 pm

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. David Hanson): I thank hon. Members for the constructive way in which this debate has been approached. This is my first debate in my new position as a Home Office Minister, just as it is my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's first debate in his new role. I suspect that not all our debates will adopt the same tone, but this one has been very constructive.

I should like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) for the positive way in which he kicked off the debate, and for tabling the motion before us today. He made the important point—which was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)—that many young people are not, and will not be, involved in crime but lead good, decent lives. For those who have become involved in criminal activity, there is often a reason for their doing so. Part of our job as Ministers is to tackle those underlying reasons, as well as their consequences.

I thank the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) for his welcome, and for his gracious tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), who served in my post for some years and did a sterling job, working with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell), to focus everyone across government on the issue of knife crime and other important areas.

We have had an interesting debate today on some extremely complex and disturbing issues. If we could solve them easily, the Government and the Opposition would undoubtedly do so. The hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) made an important contribution on culture and role models. The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T.C. Davies) talked about enforcement, early intervention and the role of custody, and about supporting alternative activities and family support. We heard a characteristically thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) about the use of custody and the need for intervention and education. He talked about partnership working, parenting, school failure and sentencing policy. He also touched on social justice and other related issues.

These are all important issues that we are seeking to address, and we are committed to doing that through the youth crime action plan and the tackling knife crime action programme. I recognise the Conservatives' and Liberal Democrats' commitment to these issues, but I hope that the House will make no mistake: the Government are committed to trying to find workable, practical

[Mr. David Hanson]

solutions to reducing knife crime and to tackling its underlying causes. These matters were also raised by the hon. Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb), for Monmouth, for Putney and for Eastleigh (Chris Huhne), and by my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Shona McIsaac) and for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington. I shall come to the important report produced by the Select Committee chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) in a moment.

Mr. Tom Watson (West Bromwich, East) (Lab): I apologise to the House for not being here for the whole of the debate; I have been on a Committee. Many people say that a knife amnesty would make a contribution to reducing a knife crime, although it would not be the only answer. Would my right hon. Friend consider that option?

Mr. Hanson: I welcome my hon. Friend's contribution, and pay tribute to his service in the Government as well. Knife amnesties have played an important part, and they are one of the tools that we can use to raise awareness of the need to tackle knife crime and to provide opportunities for some of the very dangerous weapons that can be found in households to be presented to an appropriate authority for disposal. When I was a Northern Ireland Minister several years ago, we had knife amnesties and took some very difficult weapons into proper police care. The same can apply elsewhere. That is an important strategy, and we need to consider it.

The issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East and the report that his Committee has produced have made extremely useful contributions to the debate. Obviously, he will not expect the Government to respond to the report tonight. We will have to consider it in detail. In his speech, he mentioned culture, enforcement, family, violent video games and the use of custody. Those are important issues, not just for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the Home Office but for the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the National Assembly for Wales in relation to education, and for the Ministry of Justice in regard to the responsibilities of the Youth Justice Board.

I hope that the House will make no mistake: the Government are committed to tackling these issues in a detailed and effective way, especially in the light of the tragic case of this week's knife crime incident involving Claire Wilson, which was brought to our attention by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes. That case, and the meetings that I have had with victims of knife crime, bring home the real and tragic impact of such events.

We need to focus on the issues that have been mentioned in the debate, as does the report produced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East and his Committee. We have put in place the youth crime action plan, which has been given an additional £100 million of new money to tackle some of these long-term issues in the community. We are also focusing on the knife crime action plan, and on prevention, intervention, enforcement and education. Given what the Government have tried to do through those programmes over the past couple of years, I hope that the House will share our aspiration to tackle these problems effectively.

The knife crime action plan initially put £7 million into 13 areas—that has now been extended to 16 areas—to have a serious impact on high levels of knife crime and to tackle the issues that we have discussed today. The plan includes the use of stop and search and of search wands to detect illicitly carried knives. It also involves extra policing positively to deal with these issues. This is about partnership. The plan also involves raising awareness, and encouraging schools to undertake wider education programmes. Only this morning, I visited Croydon, where I looked at a reparation scheme, visited a local school and met local community support and police officers who are undertaking alternative activities such as evening football clubs. They are trying to provide alternative activities to divert young people from falling into crime.

We now have 5,300 safer school police patrols, and extra money is going into family intervention. Money is also going into Friday and Saturday night activities under the knife crime schemes and the youth crime action plan. Thanks to work done by my predecessor and other colleagues, £3 million is going into advertising campaigns, because it has been found that showing young people the consequences of knife crime has given rise to a greater awareness among 73 per cent. of 11 to 16-year-olds.

Through the sterling work of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth, we now have great support from retailers who are signing up to not selling knives to under-18s, and we are working on online knife crime activity and looking at schemes such as the knife amnesties that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich, East just mentioned. There have been 200,000 stop and searches in one year, which discovered 3,500 knives and gave an element of enforcement at the same time.

I take the point made by the hon. Member for Eastleigh that we need to improve our data sharing. We strongly support the Cardiff model; Jonathan Shepherd came to the knife crime action steering group earlier this year. Already, 45 hospitals in the tackling knife crime action plan areas are sharing data—twice as many as only a year ago. We are also putting hundreds of thousands of pounds into the Department of Health and the Home Office to train NHS staff and the police to share data.

The hon. Member for Woking mentioned literacy and numeracy. We have talked about these vital subjects on many occasions. Education, training, sport and purposeful activity in custody provide the route to preventing reoffending. There is agreement that short-term sentences are not the most productive use of custody for individuals in our community, and we are now working on the intensive fostering projects that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and on the use of alternative community penalties. Later this year, a new reparation order will come on stream through the Ministry of Justice, providing another step before custody needs to be considered. There is general agreement among Members—with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Monmouth, with whom we often disagree on these matters—that alternatives to custody are important. We need to look at partnership working, and to work with not only the police but youth offender teams, local councils and the voluntary sector—as mentioned by the hon. Member for Putney—when dealing with these issues. We also need to look at sentencing.

Under this Labour Government, more people are being caught, more people are being sentenced, and more people are receiving longer sentences. We have seen the doubling of the maximum sentence for the possession of knives and an increase in the minimum age for buying a knife from 16 to 18. People are now 55 per cent. more likely to go to prison for these offences than they were last year. The number of offences resulting in immediate custody has gone up by 23 per cent., and the average immediate custodial sentence has risen from 133 days to 184 days during that period. The outcomes mean that we have secured a 22 per cent. fall in knife-crime hospital admissions for teenagers. We have a culture of change, and we have had fewer deaths so far this year than last year. Those are all objectives that the House shares.

I commend the Government's work and I thank the Opposition for their constructive approach. I give a commitment on behalf of this ministerial team that we will continue to press hard with our Education and Justice colleagues to ensure that we drive down the incidence of knife crime and, ultimately, the deaths resulting from it.

Question, That the amendment be made, *put and agreed to.*

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that teenage knife crime and the increased incidence of carrying knives in many communities is one of the most critical social and law and order issues facing the country; welcomes the contribution made by the Home Affairs Select Committee in its Seventh Report, Session 2008-09, on Knife Crime, published 5 on 2 June 2009; commends the work done by voluntary sector organisations like the Damilola Taylor Trust to tackle the problem; and expresses the belief that the solution to knife crime will only come from cross-community co-operation to address its root causes; further recognises that tougher penalties are being implemented against those who commit knife crimes, including a rise in the proportion of those caught carrying knives getting custodial sentences; supports the expectation to prosecute for knife possession and doubling of the maximum sentence for carrying a knife in public from two to four years; recognises that the Government has backed tough police enforcement action in the Tackling Knives Action Programme areas, including increased use of stop and search, noting that there were nearly 200,000 stop and searches, resulting in the recovery of over 3,500 knives, between June 2008 and March 2009; welcomes the additional investment going to providing targeted youth activity, including on Friday and Saturday nights; and welcomes recent provisional NHS figures showing a reduction in hospital admissions of teenagers following assaults by sharp objects.

Housing

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I advise the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7 pm

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House expresses disappointment at the minimal take-up of the Government's Homeowner Mortgage Support Scheme, Mortgage Rescue Scheme, many of the Homebuy schemes, and the facility for zero stamp duty for zero carbon homes; notes that the Government's planning guidance on housing has led to a glut of flats, the destruction of gardens and a shortage of family homes; asserts that the lowest level of housebuilding since World War II exposes the failures of the Government's top-down and undemocratic regional planning process; believes that the Government's Home Information Packs have harmed the housing market further during the recession; regrets the Government's failure to publish a Housing Reform Green Paper; and registers disappointment at the rapid and regular change in housing ministers leading to the appointment of a fourth Housing Minister in less than 18 months.

I offer a warm welcome to the new Minister for Housing as he takes up his post. I know that his background and experience will be an asset to this important Department. He actually becomes the ninth Housing Minister since this Government came to power. He is the fourth that I have faced across the Dispatch Box in the last two years and the third in the last nine months. I therefore hope that he enjoys better security of tenure than his three immediate predecessors, who lasted 211 days, 254 days and 246 days respectively. I would not want to bet my house, however, on the right hon. Gentleman lasting beyond the next election.

I would like to offer the Minister a piece of advice; I encourage him to look at the recently produced Conservative green paper on housing, which puts forward a number of ideas that the Government could adopt immediately for their own housing programme, although it seems to have caused a little confusion with the right hon. Gentleman's immediate predecessor, who seems to have taken our "right to move" policy a little too literally.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman sat around the Cabinet table for the first time this morning. He may have harboured concerns that it was his rugged good looks that had won him a seat around the Cabinet table, but I am absolutely confident that he is there for much more than window dressing and that he will do a fine job. I wish him every success.

Let us start this evening's debate by thinking about those people who are lucky enough to own their own homes, but who are desperately trying to keep them by paying their mortgages. The Prime Minister likes to stand regularly at the Dispatch Box and claim that he is offering "Real help now" through the home owners mortgage support scheme, intended to allow people to postpone paying interest on their mortgages for up to two years. It was announced on 3 December, but not launched until 21 April, with an estimated 17,000 people repossessed during that period of delay. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how many households have so far received help under that scheme.

The Chancellor called the new scheme real help for home owners at risk of repossession, but it is not even available to many home owners. When first announced, the then Housing Minister claimed it would cover some 70 per cent. of the mortgage market. She said that she

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wanted to see "all lenders" signed up to the scheme, but the reality is that fewer than half of mortgage lenders are signed up to the scheme, with some estimates suggesting it may not be much more than a quarter. Since the former Minister for Housing claimed she wanted to see them all signed up, can the present Minister for Housing tell us when he thinks that might eventually happen?

When the scheme finally launched on 21 April, the then Minister also said that six other lenders would shortly join the scheme. She described that as happening "as soon as possible", but the new Minister was kind enough to reply to a parliamentary question just yesterday, saying that only one additional mortgage lender had so far joined the scheme. Will he tell us when the other five are going to join it?

If the home owners mortgage support scheme has not worked, how about the mortgage rescue scheme? Now this is a scheme that invites registered social landlords to buy up equity in the homes of anybody struggling to pay their mortgage. It was announced on 3 September, but not launched until 16 January. This was a two-year, £285 million scheme designed to help 6,000 of the "most vulnerable families" to avoid repossession. Four months into the two years, instead of anything like 6,000, just two families have been rescued. Perhaps the Minister will therefore confirm that on the current trend, only 12 families will be helped by this scheme over the two-year period. I understand that that is despite more than 4,000 home owners approaching their local authorities for help and an estimated 31,000 homes repossessed since the time the scheme was launched.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentions the most vulnerable people, so will he explain why the motion by Her Majesty's official Opposition makes no reference to council housing, social housing or affordable housing?

Grant Shapps: I am grateful for that intervention because it gives me a chance to remind the hon. Gentleman that we held a debate about the lack of social housing in our last Opposition day debate on housing, although I am not sure whether he attended. He will also be pleased to know that I am coming to that subject in this debate because it is relevant to the Government's overall housing record.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I think I heard the hon. Gentleman say that 4,000 households had approached local authorities with queries about the mortgage rescue scheme, but data given to the Select Committee only last week suggested that only a few more than 1,000 had done so. Will he explain where he got the 4,000 figure from?

Grant Shapps: I believe that the 4,000 figure came from the Local Government Association, but I would be happy to check the figure if the hon. Lady would like to drop me a line about it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Grant Shapps: Let me make a little progress.

What I want to know is whether the Minister can tell us how much of the headline grabbing £285 million of "Real help now" under this mortgage rescue scheme has been spent on rescuing just two households. The previous Minister said last November that the mortgage rescue scheme would provide "Real help now" to homeowners facing "tough times". Will the Minister for Housing say something today to the thousands of families who, having been given completely false hope, have been repossessed in the mean time?

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The Council of Mortgage Lenders recently announced that the original figures for repossessions in this financial year would be downgraded, following last year's figures, which were lower than expected. How does the hon. Gentleman explain the fact that there are going to be fewer repossessions than were originally expected?

Grant Shapps: Frankly, when repossessions are running at an all-time high, with the only exception being—*[Interruption.]* If the position is this bad with so many families having their homes repossessed—the highest number for a generation—it is no great success and nothing to crow about if perhaps only 50,000 rather than 75,000 families are thrown out of their homes at a time when there are a bunch of failing mortgage rescue schemes going on.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Grant Shapps: I want to make some progress.

The important issue I want to raise with the Minister is what he has to say to the many families who have lost their homes when these schemes, which have been so headline grabbing and achieved 24-hour news coverage on their immediate announcement, have done so little to help families in real distress.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North) (Lab): There is an important issue here, so I would like to ask the hon. Gentleman how long people had to wait under the previous Conservative Government to be eligible for help and assistance with their mortgages. Is it not this Government who have brought the time limit down to 13 weeks?

Grant Shapps: Under the last Conservative Government, the time limit was 13 weeks, and then it improved again when the economic situation improved, but the present Government have brought the limit back down once again. I am quite happy to stand at this Dispatch Box and answer all sorts of questions from Labour Members, but today's debate is about this Government's housing record and we want answers to the questions people out there are asking. I do not mean only people being repossessed; we are also talking about people who desperately want to buy their own homes, but who find it harder than ever to get on to the housing ladder. Affordability is now at an all-time low with average affordability having halved since Labour came to power.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Has my hon. Friend noticed that since the introduction of the home improvement pack scheme there has been a big decline in the number of homes available on the market? Although that is not the only factor, can he reassure us that such expensive and unnecessary bureaucracy will be scrapped by the new Government?

Grant Shapps: I said that the new Minister might want to pick up some of the tips in our green paper, and scrapping HIPs should be at the top of the list. They are a pointless, bureaucratic waste of time, and they are

causing so much heartache out there. They are limiting the supply of new housing on the market, and making it much harder for first-time buyers to purchase properties.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Grant Shapps: Before I take any more interventions, I should like to say a little about those first-time buyers. Their number has fallen by more than 60 per cent. since 1997. It is even lower than the lowest figure during the last recession. The Government's policy has led to the lowest number of first-time buyers since records began.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I greatly enjoyed working with the hon. Gentleman when I held the housing brief. He has come on very well in the last 18 months. Does he agree that, for many potential first-time buyers, the key issue is the unaffordability of deposits? For all the promises made by the Government and, indeed, the banks, it is just not possible for first-time buyers with small salaries to find 25 per cent. of an enormous mortgage. That is one of the key barriers preventing the housing market from starting up again, certainly in Montgomeryshire and, I suspect, throughout the country.

Grant Shapps: Some credence can be attached to that intervention from a former Liberal Democrat housing spokesman—two or three housing spokesmen ago, I believe. Indeed, I think that while I have been in my present position, there have been three or four Liberal Democrat housing spokesmen, as well as the same number of Housing Ministers.

The Government's response to the issue of unaffordability has been to offer a plethora of new so-called homebuy schemes. One of them, the social homebuy scheme, is nothing if not confusing, conflicting and often contradictory in terms of itself and other schemes. It offered 15,000 families, supposedly by this point, the ability to buy part equity in their own social rented housing. Well, at this point, a mere 306 families have benefited from the scheme. Another scheme, another headline, and more disappointment for hard-pressed families out there.

What about the HomeBuy Direct scheme? I hope that the House is keeping up with the many different homebuy schemes. HomeBuy Direct was a flagship £480 million scheme, announced on 3 September and intended to help key workers and those on modest incomes to buy new homes from developers. The Minister told us that 18,000 affordable homes would be sold in that way. However, we had to wait until the end of April—233 days, which is time enough for a Housing Minister to come and go—for any sales to proceed. I should be interested to hear what the uptake has been so far.

MyChoiceHomeBuy was yet another homebuy scheme. I know that the former Housing Minister used to be confused by these schemes; I wish the current Minister luck in getting his head around them more quickly. MyChoiceHomeBuy was one of two very similar schemes. Both involved key workers—first-time buyers—owning a share in homes on the open market, and buying them with housing association help. However, MyChoiceHomeBuy ran out of money just one month after the beginning of the financial year, leaving thousands of applicants stranded.

In the course of his work as a constituency Member of Parliament, the new Minister may have received e-mails such as the one that I received from my constituents Derek and Ellen, who wrote to me about their experience of MyChoiceHomeBuy. Both are key workers. They work for the NHS, and have young children. They were delighted, they say, when the MyChoiceHomeBuy scheme was recommended to them, and were delighted to be accepted on to it. They started to get excited and to look around homes. They viewed a number of dream properties that they had previously imagined to be out of their reach. Then they were told that the scheme had run out of money. That is not just their experience, but the experience of thousands of first-time home-buyers on modest incomes working in key positions.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Did the hon. Gentleman share my disappointment that the Chancellor did not do more about stamp duty in the Budget? What would his policy be?

Grant Shapps: There are so many things that need to be done to get the housing market moving. I shall take them in order: most of them are in my speech. I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about many things done by the Chancellor, and by the Prime Minister before him, none of which have achieved the objectives in the housing market that the Prime Minister himself set out on entering No. 10.

We have already briefly mentioned home information packs. Only today we have had further proof, from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, that the housing market is suffering as a result of expensive and bureaucratic HIPs. According to RICS, new evidence released today suggests that HIPs are distorting the market, which is leading to fewer new instructions to estate agents at a time when people are struggling to buy homes. The Minister could act decisively today: he could do something practical to help the market. I offer him an opportunity to tell us now that he will use his temporary powers to suspend HIPs. In that way, he could give real help to real people.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): As my hon. Friend will know, when the Department for Communities and Local Government was looking into HIPs, even the then Minister had to admit to the Select Committee, in response to questions, that they were not delivering as they ought to have been and were having no real effect on the market. It seemed to all of us on the Committee that they were a complete and utter waste of time, and that the Department was having to beef them up to justify their existence.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right. It was clear to those who listened to the evidence given to the Committee that the former Housing Minister was not keen on HIPs, but curiously she never got around to scrapping them when she had the opportunity to do so. The new Housing Minister has a clean slate. He has an opportunity to do something positive today to help people. I hope that he will take the advice not just of the Opposition Front Bench, but of organisations such as RICS and many others which say that HIPs are completely and utterly useless.

If the Minister is in the mood to do something for people, he should note that almost all first-time buyers—nine out of 10—could be exempted from stamp duty. That is another policy that he is welcome to borrow from us. He may know—if he does not, he will get his head around it very quickly—that, in a past Budget, the present Prime Minister said that zero-carbon homes

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would be allowed zero stamp duty. We asked, out of interest, how often that had come to pass. There had been a fair amount of time for the arrangement to bed in, and one would have thought that there would be a fair amount of stamp duty exemption. The answer was that only 18 homes had benefited, and that £70,000 of stamp duty relief had been granted. In my view, this was no more than a headline-grabbing idea, and it is clearly having very little influence out there. What will the Minister do to extend the programme?

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal) (Con): Will my hon. Friend explain how the Government managed even that rebate, given that they have so far failed to define a zero-carbon home? That is why the housing industry is unable to prepare for the important changes that will come in 2016.

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is spot on. After three and a half years of consultation on what zero carbon might mean, the Government have still not reached a decision. That is what is holding back the market. That is what is making it so difficult for housing developers to know which way to turn. I wonder whether the Minister will bring the three and a half year consultation to an end soon, or whether he is aware of a recent European Union decision—made, I believe, within the last fortnight—to exclude off-site renewables from the definition of zero carbon. I understand that that has been an issue of debate and confrontation between the Treasury and the DCLG, which have different versions of zero carbon. Will the Minister pledge today to end that debate, to end the three and a half year consultation, and to produce a definition of zero carbon so that people can get on with building homes?

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I have carefully examined the 11 lines of the Opposition motion, and I find no reference at all to affordable housing for rent, whether delivered by local housing associations or local authorities. Is that not evidence of the Conservative party's continued hostility to local authorities in that regard, which was all too evident in the 18 years between 1979 and 1997?

Grant Shapps: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman attended, or has read the record of, the previous debate on affordable housing, which was called by the Opposition and held in our time. To answer his question directly, we have no opposition to anybody providing affordable housing; there is no great philosophical reason why people and organisations should not be able to provide the housing this country needs. If we are talking about the supply of affordable housing, it is well worth mentioning that this Labour Government, who supposedly were elected to help the people in greatest need, have in every single year of their tenure in office built less affordable housing for rent than either John Major or Margaret Thatcher. That is the reality of this Government's housing record.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): My hon. Friend knows very well the difficulty in building more houses in the south-east, which highlights the Government's monstrously bad record in this respect. Does he agree that it would make it easier for everyone if a commitment were given to put the infrastructure in place that could support these housing developments, instead of building houses in places that are completely unsuitable for the people who live there?

Grant Shapps: That is evidenced by the reality on the ground. Not only have fewer affordable homes been built, but this Government have on average built less housing overall in every year of their Administration. Something is going badly wrong, and what is not working is their regionalisation of housing policy. Planning and top-down targets are patently failing to deliver housing on the ground. The more it does not work, the more the Government think the way to make it work is to push harder and blame the people on the ground. They misunderstand the reasons why it is not working. People do not want building to be imposed on them; instead, they want to be part of the process of building their own communities.

That is a fundamental misunderstanding of how housing works which we will correct. We will end regional spatial strategies, get rid of regional assemblies—if the Government have not quite passed their legislation on that in time—and strip the regional development agencies of powers over planning, housing targets and numbers. We will return that to people on the ground, who can use those powers, together with incentives, to go ahead and build the housing that is really needed by local communities. In doing so, we will outperform this Government's appalling record on house building over the past 12 years.

Bob Russell: The hon. Gentleman is right to remind the current Government that the Thatcher and Major Governments built considerably more council houses, and to highlight this Government's abysmal failure in not building council houses over the past 12 years. May I ask him, however, if it is Conservative party policy to allow councils to build council houses?

Grant Shapps: As I have said, our policy is that under a Conservative Government anybody who wants to step up to the plate and build homes to house people in this country will be absolutely at liberty to do so.

There are good reasons why these policies are failing. We have talked about the failure of regional planning and the inability to understand that people on the ground best know what is required to house people in their local areas. The green paper that I have referenced addresses ideas to bring in local housing trusts, which would enable local people to decide how and where that housing goes, and also to deliver their own planning permission to go ahead and create those new communities. That would do a great deal to bring forward new housing in this country, and it would do so much more quickly than setting up massive bureaucracies that are unpopular and not democratically elected.

Let me now turn to a single example in my constituency, where this Government say that between 10,000 and 15,000 homes need to be built. We are not worried about the building of new homes; I happen to represent a couple of new towns and we are very comfortable with the idea of house building. The problem is that it is not right to stuff in 10,000 or 15,000 homes while closing the local hospital at the same time. Those are

incompatible policies that have got even the local Labour and Liberal Democrat parties campaigning and leafleting with us against the Government's plans.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): If the hon. Gentleman is not keen on having any kind of centralised or national target, will he cast a thought towards Mayor Johnson's approach in London of abolishing London-wide targets and saying everything has to be achieved through negotiations with the boroughs? The result of that is fewer homes for social rent, less housing for those who desperately need it, and a mayoralty and leadership that does not seem as desperately concerned about social housing as the previous Mayor was.

Grant Shapps: When it comes to building far fewer social housing units, this Government have the record to beat. Under them, the net change in social housing stock has been a loss of some 480,000 units, so they have very little to crow about. In the past five years, 122,000 houses have been added to the social housing stock, but for the same period before 1997 the figure was 257,000. There has therefore been a dramatic slow-down in the number of homes added. Moreover, one in six homes is judged by the Government's own measure to be non-decent.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): If a local authority such as Westminster was therefore to make the decision that only 11 per cent. of all housing constructed in the borough year on year would be affordable, should it be allowed to do that even at the expense of spiralling homelessness and the second worst overcrowding rate in London?

Grant Shapps: It is key to fixing this housing crisis, for which the current Government more than any other have to take their share of responsibility, that we understand that the trick is to build more homes in total in order that everybody at every level of the housing market, right down to those people who are homeless, get the opportunity to live with a decent roof over their head. The obsession with targeting, numbers, sub-numbers and sub-targets is not solving the problem; in fact, it has made it much more acute. The people I meet when I visit homelessness shelters do not say to me that the problem is that the target for affordable home building is not great enough. They say that the problem is that not enough homes are built, and the people who run those organisations say the problem is that there is nowhere to move people. The root of the problem is that there are 480,000 fewer units of social housing under this Government. We cannot hide behind statistics such as the percentage of new-build; the problem is that this Government have built less affordable housing and less housing overall.

Ms Buck: If the percentages do not matter and only the numbers for the absolute provision of housing matter, why is it that a low percentage does not necessarily equate to better numbers, as we can see in the failure to meet housing need? Surely housing need should be going down when the numbers are going up, regardless of percentages, but that is not happening.

Grant Shapps: Since this Government came to power, the housing waiting lists have increased from 1 million to 1.8 million families. That means that there are probably between 4.5 million and 5.5 million people languishing on the social housing waiting lists. It is getting ridiculous to be constantly lectured on how policies involving targeting, top-down Government initiatives and headline-grabbing news could possibly be the solution when the Government have failed to solve any of the problems for more than a decade. We need a new approach and a fresh start, and we need to find ways to ensure that housing actually gets built in this country to an extent that is commensurate with what people require in local communities.

We also need to solve some of our long-term housing problems, such as the so-called tenant tax. That is the confusing housing revenue account—or, rather, negative housing revenue account. It is a system whereby 140 of the councils that have their own stock or arm's length management organisations are paying into the pot and just 40 are getting something out of that pot. What happens to the rest of the money? It is sent to the Treasury, which keeps it. The sums involved are £200 million this year, projected to rise to £300 million next year. I know that many Labour Members who are interested in this subject recognise that that is a real problem. It is a tax on people who can least afford to pay it.

As the Conservative who represents the most council tenants, I can tell the House that they look very poorly on the fact that up to 50 per cent. of the rent they have to pay goes out of the area. The money does not fix the homes in my constituency or help to build new homes, but is instead sent to the Government centrally. That is not a sensible way of going about housing policy and it is not helping anyone; it is taxing the poorest people through a tenants' tax. It is completely unfair and the Government admit that it is a problem. They have put it into one of their lengthy reviews. Can the Minister tell us when the review will finally report? It has been going on for about 14 to 16 months. When will the review into the negative housing subsidy finally reach some kind of decision and tell us what is going to be done about the tenants' tax?

Mr. Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am so pleased that my hon. Friend has raised that very important point. Council tenants in Kettering borough pay £12 million a year in housing rent, £3 million of which disappears out of the borough and into the Exchequer's coffers. If Kettering borough council was able to keep that £3 million, it could do a lot to improve local housing conditions.

Grant Shapps: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. My local council pays over about £16 million and it is not as if there is not a big housing need. I have said that the Government want us to build 10,000 to 15,000 homes in the area. There is a logical way to get some of those homes built, but taking the money back to the centre is certainly not helping to tackle that problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Grant Shapps: I am aware of the time and I wish to allow others the opportunity to speak, particularly the Front Benchers. As they will get a chance to speak anyway, it might make sense if I were to make a bit of progress.

[Grant Shapps]

The Prime Minister came into office two years ago saying that housing would be this Government's No. 1 priority. He said that it was so important that whoever took the post of Minister for Housing would have to sit in the Cabinet and attend its meetings, yet, as we have seen, there have since been not three but four such Ministers. That is hardly the mark of a Government who are taking the subject seriously. Many of the Government's flagship policies have floundered and then sunk entirely. We have seen the collapse of the eco-town project. There were to be 10 eco-towns designed to deliver sustainable living around the country, but that good idea has been completely messed up by this Government's implementation and, as far as anybody can tell, there is no likelihood of the eco-towns ever seeing the light of day. We have seen derision about home information packs, and no progress has been made on the zero-carbon homes initiative or on the negative housing revenue account—

Mr. Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has made a remark that I hope he will withdraw because it is clearly completely wrong. He said that no progress had been made on reducing carbon. Does he recognise that over the past few years a remarkable change has taken place in the approach of house builders, registered social landlords and other housing providers, who have responded positively to the initiative taken by the Government to try to drive up energy efficiency standards? Code level 3 is now being delivered and code level 4 is being delivered by many RSLs. There has been a complete change in attitude towards reducing carbon, so will he please give the Government credit for that?

Grant Shapps: I certainly respect the right hon. Gentleman's considerable experience in the housing world and on the topic of housing, but I am fairly sure that *Hansard* will show that I was talking about zero-carbon homes, as in the stamp duty relief to which I made reference earlier. As I described, no progress has been made in defining what zero-carbon will mean. I went to some lengths to describe precisely how the Government have spent three and a half years considering the issue but have reached absolutely no conclusion.

This Government have failed this country on housing: they have failed with their top-down targets; they have failed to give young people the opportunity to own their own home; and they have failed to protect those who are in their own homes but are desperate for some kind of help. Such people have been misled by the promise of real help now—that has never materialised. The Government have grabbed the headlines, but the required home building has simply not happened. They have gone for the column inches, but we face a terrible legacy of Labour's failed housing policies. It is now time to end the headline-grabbing housing announcements and get on with building some homes.

7.34 pm

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

"notes that the Government has put in place comprehensive support to help households avoid repossession, that 220,000 households benefited from Support for Mortgage Interest last year, over 1,000 households have received free advice from their local authority each month since the launch of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme and many more are expected to benefit through the Homeowners Mortgage Support scheme and pre-action protocol; further notes that the Government has helped over 110,000 households into shared ownership and shared equity since 1997 and that demand for HomeBuy remains high; believes that the Government's zero carbon homes policy is a ground-breaking contribution to the fight against climate change; notes that planning policy makes clear the need for more family homes and that the Government is reviewing the evidence on garden development; notes that the highest rate of housing supply since 1977 was reached in 2007-08 and that the Government has brought forward many measures to help the construction industry, most recently £1 billion in the 2009 Budget, including £400 million to unblock stalled development and £100 million for council house building; further notes that regional planning is open and transparent and that regional planning bodies are required to take into account housing need; believes there is no evidence that Home Information Packs have any adverse impact on the market; and further notes that the Government is pursuing reform of council housing finance and the private rented sector and has set up the Tenant Services Authority to raise standards by putting tenants at the heart of regulation.".

I welcome this debate, and the remarks made by the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) at the start of his contribution. This is particularly the case on this, my second day in the job. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin), is in his first day in his new post, although he has been a councillor and a housing officer in the past. This is my fifth job in government, and normally, Conservative Members have been kind enough to drop me a note of congratulation. This is the first time that I have encountered a motion of criticism tabled instead, but I welcome this chance for an early debate.

I must say to the hon. Gentleman that I am following some very good Labour Housing Ministers, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), who is one of the most distinguished, accomplished and loyal Labour Ministers I have had the privilege to serve alongside. I am proud to have been asked to do this job, because our home matters more to each and every one of us, and to our families, than almost anything else. It is hard to have a settled life without a decent secure home in which to live. If someone's home is at risk their life is in turmoil, and everything is insecure. I am proud to be in a party that has been serious about helping to improve and promote housing in this country, and to protect people in their homes.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Council housing remains a very important part of the housing stock. The Minister will know the importance of reviewing negative subsidy on the housing revenue account. Can he give us some indication of when the review will report and we will know what the situation is? Poole has an arm's length management organisation that is very concerned about what its future will be unless the funding situation is changed.

John Healey: The short answer is soon. The slightly longer answer is that the detailed work, which the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield, who spoke from the Front Bench, will appreciate is complicated, has been largely completed. I am aware that this issue is one of the big concerns; it is one of the big jobs for me to nail, and I intend to do that soon.

The Government have shown—this is why I am proud to be a Labour Housing Minister in a Labour Government—a determination to try to improve the homes that people live in, to build the homes that people need to live in, and to help them to stay in their homes during this recession when they are at risk of not being able to do so. We have shown that during the 12 months of this economic downturn, and during our 12 years in government. We ended the long-term use of bed and breakfast for families with children five years ago. The number of families in temporary accommodation has fallen quarter on quarter for more than three years. More than 1 million people who are disabled or elderly, or who have other special needs, are able to live in their own homes because of the Supporting People programme, and more than 1 million families now live in decent homes because of our programme of repair and refurbishment, and because we dealt with the backlog left in 1997.

Jeremy Corbyn: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. He must be aware that in London, particularly inner London, local authorities tend to place people in private rented accommodation rather than in council or housing association accommodation; that is because of the shortage. Huge rents are paid, usually by housing benefit—and therein lies a benefit trap for people who are in such properties. Can he offer us some hope that not only will there be a substantial building programme to end that practice, but some progress will be made on rent control so that the public no longer, in effect, subsidise the excessive rents charged by private landlords?

John Healey: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I shall come to tenants' rights. That issue has been on my desk, and what I was doing on day one of my job was trying to find ways to increase building in order to meet the needs, particularly during this downturn, of people in his constituency, in other parts of London and in the rest of the country.

Mr. Redwood: I congratulate the Minister on his new job.

In the boom phase of their boom-and-bust approach to housing, when prices were going up, Ministers told us that they were going up because not enough houses were being built. Why are prices now going down, and what is the remedy to falling house prices?

John Healey: Before we hit this downturn, we had the highest level of house building for 30 years, with more than 207,000 new homes completed. During this recession, the answer has to be a Government prepared to do more—precisely the contrary to what we see from the Conservatives. They do not believe that the Government have a role to play, and they are not prepared to make the investment that is necessary. I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that without the measures that we are trying to put in place, there would be more people losing their homes, fewer homes being built and a greater problem in providing the low-cost or low-rent housing that people will need in future.

Bob Russell: The Government amendment refers to £100 million for council house building coming from the 2009 Budget. Will the Minister tell us how many houses will be built for £100 million?

John Healey: It is difficult to know for certain, and we will have a much clearer idea in July when we have the first deadline for bids from local authorities for the special money that was set aside in the Budget. At that point I will be able to answer the hon. Gentleman's question more clearly.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment. Today in Rotherham—my constituency and his borough—I helped to open a new socially affordable housing unit that will provide a number of low-cost homes. That is the way forward.

My right hon. Friend is Daniel in the lion's den today, and we should give him a break. However, the plain fact is that in the 1950s, his predecessor under a different Administration, Harold Macmillan, went out and built 300,000 homes a year, council and private. May I suggest that that is not the worst of ambitions? If we build homes for the people of Britain, they will not vote for the British National party in Yorkshire, and my right hon. Friend will be a full member of the Cabinet.

John Healey: I appreciate my right hon. Friend's support. He has always been a champion of my cause in government.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): That's the problem!

John Healey: Do you know, I had been wondering.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) is dead right, and the Prime Minister made a point about that idea several months ago. It is quite clear that local authority building has a bigger role to play. That was signalled in the Budget, but there is more that we can do. The Prime Minister said back in February that

> "if local authorities can convince us that they can deliver quickly and cost effectively more of the housing that Britain needs…then we will be prepared to give…our full backing and put aside any of the barriers that stand in the way of this happening."

That is a very important part of meeting the challenge ahead, and developing a bigger role for local authorities in helping to deal with the particular problems that they face in their areas.

David Taylor: I congratulate the Minister on his promotion to his post. The last word spoken by his predecessor about housing revenue accounts was in answer to a question that I asked last week. I put to my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett) the possibility of councils retaining all rent income so that they could reinvest in their local housing stock, build new houses and have the same access as registered social landlords to grants and loans to tackle the housing crisis. She seemed well disposed towards those suggestions and ideas, which have come from a wide range of organisations and individuals. Would the Minister say that he was a fan as well?

John Healey: I would, and in the spirit of what the Prime Minister promised, we are now changing the system so that local authorities can bid for housing grants on the same basis as housing associations. We are also ensuring that local authorities that receive

[John Healey]

grants from the Homes and Communities Agency can expect new homes to be excluded from the housing revenue account subsidy system. Those are steps to removing the barriers that we have seen in the past to councils playing a much bigger role in not just building but commissioning the houses that are needed in their areas.

Robert Key (Salisbury) (Con): I wish the Minister well in his aspiration to build more homes, but may I invite him to revisit the whole question of a one-size-fits-all housing policy for the country? He will recall that the former Salisbury district council ended up responding to the regional spatial strategy with a decision by the Liberal Democrat administration to build a huge new community in the middle of the countryside, with no infrastructure support. Will the Minister consider areas such as mine carefully? It has an area of outstanding natural beauty, a special area of conservation river, a world heritage site and a national park. Will he consider the absurdity that in those circumstances the planning authority does not have to listen to the water and sewerage companies? No statutory consultation with them is required, they are simply instructed, in completely inappropriate circumstances, "You will provide the water and sewerage." We have to address that problem in the wider context of housing provision right across the country.

John Healey: In 48 hours I have heard a lot of jargon and read a lot of acronyms to do with housing, but a "one-size-fits-all housing policy" is not one that I have come across. It does not seem to fit the description that the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield gave of our approach to housing, and I certainly do not recognise it. As for the serious local concern that the hon. Member for Salisbury (Robert Key) has about his constituency area, if he will allow me I shall look in detail at the points that he has raised and write to him in response.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): As the Minister seeks to increase the available housing stock, may I commend to him the National Audit Office report of 18 March on service family accommodation? It highlights the fact that 18 per cent. of accommodation controlled by the Ministry of Defence is void, up from 15 per cent. in 2005, and against the Department's target of 10 per cent. Does he agree that that represents a huge waste, and will he speak to his colleagues at the MOD to see how much of that housing can be released to the general housing pool?

John Healey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I say to him genuinely that the NAO report was not part of the background reading that was provided for me on my first day in the job. I shall ensure that I look at it, and I will follow his points closely.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): May I wish the Minister all the best in his new job? On the subject of the money that has been allocated to local authorities, is he aware that the new unitary authority in Northumberland plans to pull down 30 or 40 council houses in my constituency to build an old people's home? I am not sure whether the money was allocated for that reason, but does he not think that that plan is a bit wonky?

John Healey: I did not know about that particular scheme, which makes it difficult for me to pass judgment on it just on my hon. Friend's report, but if he wants to write to me with the details, I will be happy to take a closer look at it.

Mr. Clive Betts (Sheffield, Attercliffe) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new job, and I welcome the Government's commitment to make money available for councils to start building houses again. I hope that that is just a first step towards a much larger programme. I do not know whether he has yet had a chance to read the comments of Sir Bob Kerslake, the chief executive of the Homes and Communities Agency, to the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government the other day. He said that if the schemes were to succeed, local authorities making bids would have to be prepared to put their land in for free, to get the maximum value out of the Government's money. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that that is the case, and will he encourage local authorities to come forward with bids and put their land in, so that we get maximum value from the money available?

John Healey: There are few in the House with a greater knowledge of these matters than my hon. Friend, and he is exactly right. In the pitch that local authorities are making for part of the £100 million that we made available in the Budget for councils to build, we are looking for them to put their own land into the pot. That will contribute not just to the building of lower-cost new houses, but potentially to building the houses that are needed more quickly. That is part of the advantage of looking to local authorities to do more, in precisely the way that I want to see, as does the Prime Minister.

I shall now say something about our response during the past 12 months. We have aimed to act swiftly to support those most affected by the downturn—first of all, people and families at risk of repossession, and of losing the very thing that is at the centre of the stability of their life: their home. We have acted to try to help those with particular problems in the housing market, including first-time buyers. We have also acted to try to support the construction industry, as well as to maintain the supply of new homes. At the same time, we have tried to pursue the longer term goals of increasing the supply of new homes, especially for low-cost rent or purchase. We have also looked to raise the quality, in both design and environmental terms, of homes, as well as to reinforce the rights of tenants.

Our approach to the recession and those at risk of losing their homes can be characterised in two ways. The first is an attempt to put in place universal support available to all, whatever their circumstances. The support for mortgage interest scheme helps more than 200,000 households through the benefit system. We acted in January to change the rules so that more people could get more help more quickly through that scheme. That is why the Council of Mortgage Lenders, in its evidence to the Select Committee, said that the

"reduction in the period for claiming income support mortgage interest was a pretty fundamental change...it has been of very significant assistance."

Mr. Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent, South) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on his well-deserved promotion. As he outlines the measures available, will he contrast those with the level of support available in the early 1990s, when interest rates were 16 per cent. and people faced negative equity and losing their homes?

John Healey: I have worked with my hon. Friend for a long time and I have a great deal of time for him, but he has just stolen some of my best lines. He is right. We have tried to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes the Tories did in the 1990s. Moreover, we have fundamentally different values, and a different view of the role of Government when people are struggling and the economy is in recession. That is why we have acted where we can to try to help people stay in their own homes. We have acted to try to help firms stay in business. We have acted to try to help people stay in work. That is the fundamental duty of a Labour Government when people are in trouble.

The universal support that we have tried to put in place for all families and households irrespective of means and circumstances includes free access to advice desks in courts across the country. That is an important part of the help that has been made available. It also includes the negotiation of a comprehensive range of support from lenders through the home owners mortgage support scheme, which has ensured that lenders view repossession as a last resort, rather than moving faster to try to repossess.

The motion mentions the special schemes for people in specific circumstances. For example, more than 130 vulnerable households have so far benefited under the mortgage rescue scheme. It does not necessarily entail a simple buy-back of those homes; it can mean—as it has done in many cases—a freeze in the repossession actions by lenders. The scheme is not simply about stepping in to take over the ownership and equity for people who cannot pay the mortgage at all. Local authorities report to us that as a result of the scheme, more than 4,000 households that have been struggling with their mortgages have received free advice from their local authority.

The measures are designed to be more than the sum of their parts. The combination of mortgage advice, intervention in the courts and lenders viewing repossession as a last resort means that in the first quarter of this year—a time when many would expect repossessions to rise—we have seen a 40 per cent. fall in applications to the courts by lenders to take possession of people's homes.

The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield said that repossessions were at a record high. Repossessions were at a record high in the early 1990s. They were at a record high of more than 75,000 in 1991, when one in 12 households were in arrears and 1.5 million people were in negative equity. The combination of the action we have taken to try to help people stay in their homes means that at the very point at which one might expect the number of repossessions to go through the roof, as it did in previous recessions, only 12,800 were reported in the first quarter of this year. The result is that the director general of the Council of Mortgage Lenders said last month that his forecast of repossession numbers this year now looks pessimistic, and he expects to revise it. That revision is a direct result of the action that we have taken, in combination with lower interest rates and other actions that we have taken on the economy.

We know that first-time buyers have been hard hit by a lack of credit, with lenders in some cases requiring deposits of up to 40 per cent. So despite falling house prices, they are unable to get on to the property ladder. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) mentioned home information packs, but it is the lack of access to credit that is the fundamental cause of stagnation in the housing market. There is no evidence to suggest that home information packs have added to the difficulties. On the contrary, a survey by Connells estate agents showed that sales with HIPs get to exchange six days earlier. ICM has highlighted the fact that more than eight out of 10 first time buyers in particular want more information, and HIPs are part of the answer.

The hon. Gentleman invited me to look at his green paper on housing and stronger foundations. I have done so, and I was struck by several aspects of it, not least the introduction by the Leader of the Opposition. He said:

"Generations of families are trapped in social housing, denied the chance to break out…I don't want a child's life-story to be written before they're even born".

Grant Shapps: Very good.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman says that, but it is social stereotyping of the worst sort. The truth is that council housing and housing association housing have provided security, strong communities and decent homes, meaning a decent start for many families that they would not otherwise have been able to afford.

Bob Russell: Can the Minister explain why, in 12 years of a Labour Government, fewer council houses were built than during the 10 years of Margaret Thatcher?

John Healey: I have talked about some of the things that we have done. I have talked about the mix of housing built by housing associations and by councils. I have also been clear about the fact that I see a much bigger role for councils in future. That is one of the big tasks that face me.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Healey: If I may, I wish to accept the invitation from the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield to look carefully at what the Tories are saying about housing. What comes over clearly is not a desire to build, to protect tenants' rights, or to give people a decent and secure home. Instead, it is a desire to remove the right to security from council tenants and housing association tenants—

Grant Shapps *indicated dissent.*

John Healey: Well, I have to say that, two days into this job, I am aware of a cacophony of Tory voices, some of them billed as experts and advisers on Tory policy, clamouring for the right to remove people's security of tenure, especially in local government housing. These are not marginal figures. They include the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham council, who is a distinguished and influential figure in Tory party policy circles. He published a paper in which he called for

"tearing down the Berlin Wall of varying tenure and rent levels that operates between the private rented and social rented sectors".

[John Healey]

He advocates

"one form of tenancy, modelled on an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST), which any landlord could offer."

In other words, 8 million people—4 million families—would have the security of their home reduced to a two-month notice period.

Dr. Starkey: If I understand correctly, the suggestion by that Tory spokesperson was that the Berlin wall between rent in the private rented sector and the social rented sector should be torn down. Surely if rents in the social sector in London went up to the level of the private rented sector, everybody in council accommodation in London would effectively be unable to work because they would lose their home, as they would lose their housing benefit. Is that really the policy that the Opposition propose?

John Healey: That is the sort of intervention that I would expect from my hon. Friend. She sees very clearly that this is not just a question of removing the rights of tenure and removing security. The question of the Berlin wall between rent levels has profound implications of exactly the nature that she identifies.

It is not just a matter of the Opposition removing the rights to security and the rights of council tenants or housing association tenants. The truth is that they do not believe in social housing in the first place—there is no mention of it in tonight's motion. That is the case at all levels of the party—*[Interruption.]* They protest, but they have not put it in their motion. This is a debate about housing. If they believed in social housing, they would not be talking about cutting £800 million from the housing budget. They would not be talking about cutting £240 million from the budgets of local authorities. Those are not cuts for the future, but cuts that they would make now if they had the chance in government.

I talked about that being true at all levels of the Conservative party. It is true at a national level, but what about London? What about the Mayor of London? He scrapped the Labour Mayor's 50 per cent. affordable housing target—a Labour Mayor and a Labour regime that believed in social housing—in favour of what he calls negotiation with the boroughs. I will tell the House what has happened there: he is allowing them to shirk their responsibility to provide housing at levels that people can afford, whether they rent or buy. Members can look across the Tory boroughs at what this new Tory Mayor is allowing them to get away with. I mentioned Hammersmith and Fulham; my hon. Friends know—

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab) rose—

John Healey: I shall give way to my hon. Friend; he knows Hammersmith and Fulham better than anyone else.

Mr. Slaughter: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, not least because I cannot make the points that I would like to make in this debate, because my voice has gone. I am grateful that he has made the point about Hammersmith and Fulham, but will he bear it in mind that the points about abolishing security of tenure, market rents and having no responsibility for homelessness are not just ravings committed to paper? They are being implemented on my constituents today, with the demolition of their homes, the sale of their homes and the refusal, on purely ideological grounds, to build a single social rented property. What is happening in Hammersmith and Fulham today is the Tory plan for housing in Britain tomorrow.

John Healey: My hon. Friend talks about Tory ravings; I have another example. It is not just from any old councillor, but from one of the housing advisers at Westminster council. If Members are looking for ravings, then this is an interesting article from Localis, the policy platform. The adviser talks about supporting social housing as an

"absurd, unjust and unfair subsidy".

If these were just ravings and writings, I would not be so concerned, but my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Slaughter) is right. He has told me about a development in Shepherd's Bush, on Bloemfontein road in his constituency. It is a £50 million development that, under the Labour Mayor and Labour council, was set to have contained 50 per cent. affordable housing—half for low-cost sale and half for low-cost rent. Under the new regime, now that the Mayor of London has let local councils in London off any responsibility for providing this housing, that will now be only 39 per cent. affordable housing with no provision for rent at all. The truth is that the Conservatives do not understand this type of housing. They do not support it, but they just dare not say so this side of an election.

Ms Buck: My right hon. Friend mentioned the deputy cabinet member for housing in Westminster. Is he aware that in the same article the councillor went on to describe council housing as:

"A unique version of 'who wants to be a millionaire' UK welfare state style"

and as a

"subsidy production…machine with luxury style levels of winnings"?

Does that, to my right hon. Friend, suggest someone who supports providing affordable housing for low-income households?

John Healey: No, but I am glad that my hon. Friend has read the same Localis article as I have.

Mr. Syms: Will the Minister give way?

John Healey: I will—for a second time, I think.

Mr. Syms: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. Of course, his Government are taking 20 per cent. of the rents off my tenants in Poole and whizzing it into central London to Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham, Camden, Islington and the other authorities. If they are such lousy authorities in central London, why take £4 million from Poole?

John Healey: You were not in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, when the hon. Gentleman asked me a similar question about the review and the reform of the housing revenue account. I have given him his answer.

Ms Buck: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Healey: I will, but then I shall wind up as I know that other people want to speak.

Ms Buck: We have had several recommendations from Opposition Members that contributions to the housing revenue account from their local authorities should be repatriated. Does my right hon. Friend share my suspicion that, were there to be a Conservative Government, unless they pledged additional money for housing investment, tenants in areas such as mine—in Hammersmith and Fulham, in Westminster and so on—would be dramatically worse off?

John Healey: My hon. Friend, who understands these things as well as any other Member of the House, is right about those risks and about the dangers in the system. Precisely the same risks and hidden aims can be found in claims that the Opposition want to see localisation of the business rate, as that would drive a coach and horses through their ability to redistribute funding to local areas and local councils from areas that have the capacity and high tax base to raise it to those that have a low tax base but perhaps a high need for it.

Mr. Flello: Will my right hon. Friend give way on that point?

John Healey: I was about to wind up, but as it is my hon. Friend of course I will.

Mr. Flello: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has been making a superb speech. Will he clarify whether he is saying that under a future Tory Government—heaven forbid—the good folk of Stoke-on-Trent would have less subsidy for council housing in their area?

John Healey: That is easy. What is clear for Stoke-on-Trent is that were the Conservatives to come into Government, the funding for housing would be cut, the funding for local councils would be cut and the people of Stoke-on-Trent, many of whom need that support from central Government, would simply not get it.

Mr. Love: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Healey: As my hon. Friend presses me to do so, I will.

Mr. Love: I thank my right hon. Friend for being so generous with his time. I wanted the opportunity, like many others here tonight, to congratulate him on his new role, which he is fulfilling with great promise this evening. The implication of what he said about Conservative party policy is, of course, much greater. The last time the Conservatives deregulated rents, they said, "Let housing benefit take the strain." The implication for public expenditure of such proposals from a party that says that we have to restrict public expenditure is either that such expenditure will go through the roof or that tenancies will be jeopardised across the country.

John Healey: Spot on. I can see why my hon. Friend serves with such distinction. He is certainly not wasting his time on the Select Committee on the Treasury, and I regret only that that commitment meant that he had to step down as my Parliamentary Private Secretary. I am grateful for the support he gave me, although I think that the period was too short.

The motion ignores entirely our record of success over the past 12 years, with unprecedented investment in social and affordable housing and unprecedented investment in dealing with a backlog of repairs and homes for 2 million people that simply were not decent enough to live in. It ignores the fact that house building in 2007-08 was at the highest level for 30 years. It ignores the dramatic falls in the levels of homelessness and the changes in the planning system that will make things faster, fairer and more strongly democratic. It also ignores the recent reforms that give tenants stronger rights and a more powerful voice.

The Government's amendment provides a fuller and fairer picture of our housing policy record. I am proud of much of what we have achieved so far, but I am also clear that we have a great deal more to do. We must do much more to help people get into the homes that they need, and to stay in the homes that they have. In particular, we have a great deal more to do to ensure that the homes that people need in future are built and available for them.

That is my task, as Housing Minister, from tomorrow—from day three.

8.10 pm

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): May I begin by welcoming the Housing Minister and all the new ministerial team to their roles? Obviously, the Minister is not new to the Department, but I am sure that he will find the housing brief the most interesting and challenging part of the Communities and Local Government portfolio. Personally, I am disappointed and sorry to see his predecessor, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), go to his new post as Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, and I hope that the Minister will pass on my best wishes to him. It became almost a weekly ritual for us to debate housing in Westminster Hall, and he always made his points with charm and courtesy. I thank him for that.

It is a great frustration for me to debate yet another Conservative motion that has nothing positive to say. The Conservative analysis of Government failures in housing seems largely correct: it is certainly true that the Government's mortgage support scheme has so far helped just two people, that the facility for zero stamp duty for zero-carbon homes has helped just 18, that Government policies are leading to woefully inadequate numbers of homes being built, and that almost all of them are small flats. It is also a statement of the obvious that the Prime Minister appears to show a careless disregard for his own Housing Ministers, but where are the new ideas in the motion?

The motion is just one long whinge, and I for one find it deeply depressing. We have just lived through probably the most difficult few weeks in politics that I have experienced in my lifetime, and I suspect that most hon. Members will not be able to remember any time as difficult. Faith in representative democracy and in this place is at an all-time low: just one person in three turned out to vote last week, and it is really difficult to persuade people that politics actually matters and can make a difference.

[Sarah Teather]

I have spent most of the last few weeks going into schools, and it has been harder than ever to convince young people that being an MP is an amazing and incredible job because one has an opportunity to change not just the life of one person, but whole systems. Yet we are stuck here until 10 o'clock on a Tuesday evening debating an Opposition motion that does not mention a single idea for changing anything at all. It is no wonder that voters are disillusioned—I feel disillusioned too.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Lady made a very good point about flats. Does she agree that one of the worst things about an overarching central planning system is that it gives us lots of flats that cannot be sold, when what we need are family homes? Many families are living in very overcrowded conditions, and flats are not the solution.

Sarah Teather: The Conservatives do not have any proposals to address that problem, which I am not sure is governed entirely by planning. I think it is mainly to do with targets and how housing associations are funded, but they do not seem to have any solutions in that regard either.

I accept that the Conservative spokesperson has recently produced a couple of housing policy papers. The first, the so-called "Shapps report", contained no policy proposals whatsoever, being just a string of graphs that some researcher had downloaded from the DCLG website. His later papers on empty properties and building homes were notable for a much higher quality of graphic design, but that was not enough to distract me from the absence of any promises of new money.

The problem is that abolishing central targets alone will not build any new homes. We agree that it will build different types of homes, but it will not build any more homes. If the Conservative spokesperson is so pleased with the policy papers that he has produced, why on earth did he not put anything of what they contain into the motion that we are debating today? Instead, we have 11 lines of sweet Fanny Adams to discuss.

Anne Main: The hon. Lady is disputing whether we should argue over targets, but I am sure that she will accept that the Liberal Democrat council in St. Albans has successfully defeated the Government's regional spatial strategy on targets. I welcome that, as local people should decide how many homes there should be and where they should be placed. It is not just a question of having more and more homes: we need to put the infrastructure in place first, and then give local people the power to make decisions. I should have thought that she would welcome that, and not say that we need more houses regardless of what local people want.

Sarah Teather: If the hon. Lady had listened, she would know that I did not dispute the proposal to abolish central targets. What I said was that that alone would not build any new houses.

We attempted to amend the Conservative motion and, although our amendment was not selected for debate, it is on the Order Paper and hon. Members are welcome to read it. They will see that we accept the motion, and then go on to propose some solutions—something lacking from anything put forward by the Conservatives.

I accept the whingeing in the Conservative motion, and the criticism and analysis that it contains, but let us have some sort of solution that would make things better. Without that, why are we here? What were we elected for if we do not have any ideas for making Britain a better place? The motion is just pointless.

Mr. Drew: I hope that I can help the hon. Lady. Nowhere in the Conservative motion or the amendments proposed by the Government and the Liberal Democrats is there any mention of rural housing and the crisis that exists there. I know that hon. Members in all parties know exactly what I am talking about. As the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) knows, I am a great advocate of community land trusts. We have to look at rural areas, as the housing crisis is not confined to urban Britain. Our towns and villages have insufficient housing for people of lesser means, and I hope that the hon. Lady will agree that we have to address that as well.

Sarah Teather: I agree completely with hon. Gentleman, although I point out that my amendment deals only with housing and makes no mention of the words "urban" or "rural" specifically. I also agree with him about community land trusts, which he and I have debated in Westminster Hall. The trusts are very important in Cornwall and many other rural areas, and they may even represent a policy on which we can achieve all-party agreement.

I said that the Conservative motion was vacuous, but the Government amendment reminds me a little of the string quartet that kept playing as the Titanic sank. There is no acceptance of what is happening in the real world: the Government hunker down and comfort themselves by reeling off a list of statistics while closing their ears to the desperate cries of those who have lost their homes, who live in cramped and unacceptable homes or who have no hope whatsoever of getting even that.

Some 1.8 million families are languishing on council lists waiting for a suitable home that they can afford to rent. In London, around one household in 10 is waiting to be rehoused. In my constituency, the figure is even higher, with one household in five stuck on the waiting list for a council or housing association property.

Earlier, the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) mentioned the link with the British National party, and I think that he is right. Some of the areas worst affected in terms of housing are in the old Labour heartlands. The very people who elected this Government are the ones most let down on the issue of housing.

Housing is a powder-keg issue. It ignites rows about race and immigration, and it provokes people to lose faith in the system. It is the very issue that fascist parties rely on to breed resentment and hate. The Leader of the House is correct to say that the Government should take responsibility for the rise of the BNP, and I completely agree. However, if there is to be any hope of tackling that sort of fascist politics, housing is where the Government have to start.

What is needed is a serious investment in affordable housing to rent. The Government invested £12.5 billion in a VAT cut that made little or no difference to people's lives, when they could have spent that on building tens of thousands of more homes for people to live in.

The Government also need to accept that the old cross-subsidy model of house building is not going to build any new homes in the short term. They need to scrap Treasury targets on the number of units per unit of subsidy so that housing associations have the confidence to know that they can use the money available to build without facing penalties later.

It is ridiculous that at the very time in a recession that we need house building to increase, building has been grinding to a halt. So much for the fiscal stimulus. By the time we get out of the recession, housing need will be greater, house prices will again spiral out of control, and we will not be able to do anything about it because the builders will all have retrained or gone back to Poland. We will have nothing with which to tackle the problem.

The Government have a real opportunity to improve housing now. Major investment now could absolve them of the sins of the past 10 years. I hope they will realise that they have an opportunity now and a clear way to make amends. I was pleased to hear the new Minister say how important he thinks it is that councils should be able to build homes. Councils are desperate to be able to build new homes for families in their area. They have to pick up the pieces when homeless families land on their doorstep, but they have only limited powers to fix the problem.

The Prime Minister made warm noises about that several months ago, but the proposals that were put forward were thin on the ground. The Minister was not sure how to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) on how many new homes would be built with the new money available. We calculated that it would be about 900 homes. That is two or three for every local authority area, which will make only a tiny dent in the number of 1.8 million people on housing waiting lists.

If councils are to be able to borrow to build, they need to know what their asset base and their rental income will be. Taking new homes alone out of the housing revenue account is not enough. We must have fundamental reform of the housing revenue account system now. I am pleased to hear from the Minister that it will conclude soon, but we have heard that for a very long time. Every time there is a change of Housing Minister, it gets further delayed.

I was pleased to hear the Conservative spokesperson join our campaign to end the tenant tax, but I was left a little unclear about what the Conservatives' proposals would be. The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) stated the position well for me. In my constituency, Brent, we receive a subsidy from poor tenants in Cambridge. It is invidious for poor tenants in Cambridge to be subsidising poor tenants' repairs in Brent, and a solution is needed. Our solution is that that should be topped up out of general taxation. People like me, who can afford to pay out of their taxes, should pay for that, but the Conservatives have no proposal at all, which means that there will be no money for repairs in places like my constituency.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Lady makes a good point. For all political parties, need has always been the basis of housing. If there is a debate about whether some areas should have resources and some should not, there has to be some kind of compromise. General taxation is one way of doing it, but at present the negative subsidy is rising so fast that in five years most councils will not have council housing stock, because of what is happening to the financial system.

Sarah Teather: I entirely agree that we must end the system of negative subsidy. It is ridiculous. Councils cannot plan because they do not know what money they will have from one year to the next. They need to know that their rental income is available to reinvest in their housing stock for repairs or for building, and so that they have something against which they can borrow, knowing what their future revenue stream will be. The Treasury currently keeps about £200 million of the money coming in from rental income, so it is not as though all of it is going to repair houses in other parts of the country. It is unacceptable for the Chancellor to keep a portion of that rent.

The second thing that the new Minister should do urgently is to give councils back their right-to-buy receipts. Only then can councils replace the homes lost through right to buy, to make sure that future generations have a chance of somewhere to live. Since 1980, 2.5 million council properties have been purchased under right to buy from a council stock that then stood at 5 million. It is no wonder that councils have nowhere for people to live.

Taken together, new money, investment of rental and right-to-buy income, and extension of powers to borrow would make a real difference to councils' ability to build homes that people need. But in the Conservative motion and in their green paper, they have no plans to do that. They have plans to review the HRA system and to end the tenant tax, but no plans to top up finance that is lacking for repairs. They have no plans to invest more money in social homes and no plans to give councils back money from right to buy, so I cannot see how they can deliver on their promise to build more council homes.

Bob Russell: Does my hon. Friend recall that I could not get an answer from those on the Conservative Front Bench on whether a Conservative Government would bring back the building of council housing?

Sarah Teather: Yes. It was a depressing moment. The Conservative spokesman seemed to be unclear which direction he would go in, were he to become a Minister. We are calling for a general election and he hopes to become a Minister, but he does not seem quite sure of the direction in which he would take his party.

Mr. Love: I have been listening carefully to the hon. Lady's incredibly disparaging remarks about the Conservative party's policy in this area, yet the Conservatives do not seem to be prepared to answer on any of the issues. Does that not speak volumes about the vacuity of what the official Opposition are offering?

Sarah Teather: Yes. My hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Julia Goldsworthy) said to me from a sedentary position that she was not sure whether that was because the Conservatives did not understand or did not care. I shall not be as mean as that, but they seem to be unwilling to put their policies out there so that people can scrutinise them and argue

[Sarah Teather]

with them. I do not understand why they are elected if they are not prepared to debate ideas. It seems to me that that is why we are here.

Mr. Slaughter: It seems strange to be debating the matter when the Conservatives are here but silent. As they are silent, let us continue debating it. The hon. Lady heard the answer from my right hon. Friend the Minister. We know what the Conservatives' policy is because their think tanks are telling us. It is no more social housing, no security of tenure, market rents, no responsibility for homelessness, and effectively the end of social housing in this country. They will not say that because they know that 8 million people out there will rumble them if they hear it.

Bob Russell: You can say that again.

Sarah Teather: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman could not do that and I should offer him some advice as someone who lost her voice after being ill. It is best to keep quiet. It will heal much more quickly if he says less, I promise, but I thank him for his intervention.

I shall continue to be a little bit rude to the Conservatives, and then I shall move on. On right to buy, not only have they no plans to give back right-to-buy receipts, but they want to extend right to buy to housing associations. That idea has been universally condemned. Housing associations already face great difficulty because of the current economic climate, and the Conservatives want to remove their rental income and dwindle their asset base. Who on earth do they think will lend money to them to build homes under those circumstances? Worse, a requirement to sell properties at below market values would be against the charter of most housing associations. It is not a feasible or a sensible policy to take forward.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the right to buy council housing stock led to cherry-picking and the loss of some of the best council housing stock, and meant the ghettoisation of some council housing? Does she not fear that exactly the same thing would happen if Conservative policy for other social landlords were implemented?

Sarah Teather: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) recently made a similar point about right to buy as part of the report for the Centre for Social Justice.

In addition to building new homes, it is important that we make a more concerted effort to bring empty properties back into use. The hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) made a point about MOD housing—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester has made many times in the Chamber. It is an excellent point, but we need to be willing to think flexibly also about empty commercial space during a recession, and to be prepared to offer short-life housing to people who want it. The single most important thing that the Government could do to help to bring empty properties back into use is to make renovating them cheaper. They should cut VAT on renovation, rebuild and then make grant available to housing associations to repair the empty properties that they buy, because at the moment they cannot use Homes and Communities Agency money to do so. The Government should also offer grants and loans to individuals to repair properties in return for lets to social housing tenants. All those things would make a difference.

The Conservatives' key policy for tackling empty properties is to reduce the space and design standard for social homes, and I wonder whether they have any idea how long the average social tenant spends in temporary accommodation. If one puts a tenant into a draughty or cramped unsuitable home as a supposedly short-term measure, most will still be suffering in unsuitable housing a decade later.

Anne Main: I am following the hon. Lady's argument on empty properties with great interest, because empty dwelling management orders, as she knows, are a totally under-utilised device. Indeed, they have been completely under-utilised by the Liberal Democrat-led council in St. Albans, so before she lectures all of us on bringing back empty homes, I should say that I have been pressing my council to get its empty homes back into use. However, it has not as yet chosen to use that device. We could all lecture each other on empty homes, so I hope that the hon. Lady will bear that in mind.

Sarah Teather: I am greatly relieved to hear the hon. Lady's conversion to EDMOs, because her party opposed them when they were debated in this place.

Early in the debate, a lot of time was spent poking fun at the Government's mortgage rescue scheme and its total inadequacy in the face of the 50,000 or 70,000 repossessions—depending on which estimate one takes—this year. However, I shall give some credit where credit is due, because the Government have done some welcome things, particularly on the changes to income support for mortgage interest. When we add up all the different schemes, however, we still have the problem whereby tens of thousands of people fall through the net and face having their home repossessed. Similarly, if the landlord of a bought or buy-to-let property gets into difficulty, the people renting such properties may find themselves on the street with no notice whatever.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): My hon. Friend was just talking about how the mortgage rescue scheme has failed to help many people who face losing their homes. Last week, a very worrying case was raised with me of an individual who, at the beginning of December last year, thought that they would be one of the first beneficiaries of such a scheme, but, at the end of April, they were told that they no longer qualified. During that period, their mortgage payments were frozen, and they are now more likely to face repossession as a result of their being rejected for the scheme. Should not the Government be helping to prevent such problems rather than making matters worse?

Sarah Teather: I absolutely agree: it is a very worrying case. The difficulty is that many criteria have been drawn tightly, and it has been difficult for the people implementing the scheme to understand exactly what will happen as they go through the process. It takes a long time before someone is approved or found not to be eligible to claim help, and, in the meantime, they can get into great difficulty.

The Government introduced a pre-action protocol that I thought contained many useful things. I agreed with all the protocol's sentiments, which we called for before the Government published it, but the problem is that it has no teeth, and I cannot understand why the Government are not prepared to reform mortgage law to give it teeth. If we were to reform mortgage law, we could give the courts the power to intervene to enforce some of the good things that are in the pre-action protocol. We would also be able to deal with the situation when a landlord's home is repossessed and the people who rent it get no notice at all, except when they go home and find that the locks have been changed. We can deal with much of that simply by giving the courts the power to intervene and then to put the rest into guidance, as the Government have done. I pressed the Minister's predecessor repeatedly on the issue, and I hope that the new Minister will consider it afresh.

I am pretty fed up to be debating another Conservative motion that has nothing in it.

Grant Shapps: Why don't you call a housing debate?

Julia Goldsworthy: She'd have plenty to say.

Sarah Teather: I would have plenty to say, and there is lots more that I could say.

Grant Shapps: When are we going to have a Lib Dem housing debate?

Sarah Teather: We have fewer Opposition day debates, so the Conservatives might like to give us one of theirs. We would be quite delighted to lead on the issue.

What depresses me is that the Conservatives have nothing to say on the issue and the Government seem to be sticking their head in the sand. It depresses me because my constituents need this place to take positive action and to do something to make their lives better.

I shall end by telling the House a story that, I am afraid, is typical in Brent. Lucy has been living in temporary accommodation in my constituency for 14 years. She lives in a two-bedroom flat with her four children and bids regularly on the choice-based letting system. However, the highest that she has ever been ranked is 140th out of 300, and she has no hope whatever of moving. Her eldest child is now 16 and has lived in that unsuitable property for almost her whole life. She needs some room—a bit of quiet and privacy away from brothers and sisters—to study for her GCSEs, otherwise the misery of her housing situation, which has blighted her whole childhood, will ruin her future, too. We need the Government to act for people like that. We have a new Minister; I implore him to make a new start.

8.34 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): I, too, should like to welcome the Minister for Housing to that most important post. About three quarters of householders in this country are home owners. For most of those people, most of the time, being a home owner has been a happy and successful experience. It has benefited them and their families enormously. Obviously, the majority of people still aspire to be home owners. However, people in many of those families are experiencing real pain because of a combination of factors, including lack of affordability and changes in their circumstances; in some cases they will have lost their job. That leaves many families genuinely worried, and they are sometimes at risk of losing their homes. That rightly causes concern to all of us. My right hon. Friend has already recognised that in the early 1990s the level of repossessions, with all the pain that repossessions put families through, was at least as high as it is now; in some cases it was higher. However, that should not stop us focusing a great deal of attention and support on those families. It is absolutely critical that we do everything that we can to reduce repossessions and to help people through a difficult time.

On looking at mortgage law, I agree with the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather) that we should in some cases do more to enforce controls against lenders who are excessively zealous in the action that they are taking. One particular group of people about whom we need to worry are tenants in buy-to-let properties. In some instances, we should also worry about unauthorised tenants in properties in cases in which the mortgage holder has defaulted. Such tenants have virtually no protection and are at risk of being thrown out, sometimes with no notice whatever. In many cases, they then become the responsibility of the local authority. I know that the Government are considering the issue; it is important that they look at it closely and act swiftly. For a host of reasons—for the sake of the people involved, and because of the pressures on local authorities—we need to do what we can to support those individuals.

Julia Goldsworthy: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I agree it is important that the Government and the Minister should come forward with proposals as soon as possible. Does she agree that the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill, which is currently being considered by the House, provides an opportunity to make such proposals, and does she agree that the Minister should make the most of that opportunity to bring forward proposals as soon as possible?

Ms Buck: I have not looked closely enough at the clauses of the Bill to know whether it would be an appropriate hook, but I see no reason at all why Ministers should not at least consider whether it provides an opportunity. There is no question but that there are large numbers of vulnerable households in such properties, whom we may need to act swiftly to assist.

Before I move on to the core of what I want to talk about, may I take the opportunity to raise with the Minister an issue that I have raised many times with his predecessors? It is the plight of local authority leaseholders—people who own ex-local authority stock, having bought it, sometimes through the right to buy, but more frequently through resale. In some cases—I am thinking of my constituents—as an unintended consequence of a desirable objective, namely the decent homes initiative, they face major works bills of £60,000.

Some groups of such leaseholders enjoy various concessions when it comes to that repayment. In particular, those who are retired are able to put a charge on their property for sale. However, many younger, working households have not so far been able to avail themselves of a scheme that gives them any realistic opportunity of

[Ms Buck]

being able to repay without losing their home. I am seriously worried about that group of people, and I urge the Government to swallow the resistance—a resistance that is also rooted in my local authority, Westminster, so it is cross-party—to providing practical support for those households. Some of them will lose their homes when those bills fall due, and they do not have the money to pay them.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): Is that not a factor resulting from encouraging people at the margins to try to get into owner-occupation? That, in the long term, is unwise because of the costs and risks of owner-occupation, which some people can bear and others cannot.

Ms Buck: There is an important point in my hon. Friend's comment. Generally speaking, what he has mentioned was not a problem among local authority leaseholders, although it depended a little on where they were. The leaseholders causing me the greatest concern were those who held leases in high rises; it is extremely expensive to carry out decent homes initiative work on high rises. Many other leaseholders, however, were perfectly able to sustain a mortgage on ex-local authority stock in normal times.

However, there is a genuine issue. Last week in my advice surgery, I met yet again a woman on housing benefit, who—extraordinarily—was allowed to buy her local authority property from Westminster council. I do not understand how anybody could have been complicit in allowing and encouraging people on very low incomes—sometimes benefit-level incomes—to buy their own homes.

It is also fair to say that the roots of much of the global economic catastrophe with which we are now dealing lie in the American sub-prime mortgage market, in which people who simply had no realistic means of repaying home loans were encouraged to buy. We all have to be careful, however; the issue is not confined to America and it is not just a party political point. We have an understandable desire to support and encourage people into home ownership, but there are people on the margins who should not have been so encouraged.

That brings me to my core point, which has been mentioned in this debate. I am thinking of the 4 million social tenants and the 4 million or so people—who overlap with the former to some extent—who are in a queue for social housing. Fundamentally, the big dividing line in housing policy is now between those of us who believe that social housing is part of the solution and those who believe that it is part of the problem. I say in all fairness that the Government have not built enough social homes; I have never believed that they have, and I am on record as having said that. I am concerned about meeting housing need, and I cannot deny that that is true.

However, it is also true, although ignored on the Opposition Benches, that the money that we have invested in social housing has been much needed investment in the decent homes initiative. We have rehabilitated and refurbished tens of thousands of homes in my constituency that were long overdue. The investment was made, although I would have preferred it to have been slightly more balanced towards new homes.

Mr. Slaughter: I do not want to correct my hon. Friend, but the situation is worse than that. The Tory council in my constituency tried to give back the decent homes initiative money; it said that it did not want it. Now the councillors involved describe it as an exercise in upgrading the deckchairs on the Titanic. They really do not believe that there is a future for social housing. They think that the £13 billion of decent homes initiative money was wasted.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend always manages to trump me when it comes to Hammersmith Conservatives; what is going on in that borough is jaw-dropping. He is absolutely right. Sometimes it seems to me that Hammersmith Conservatives make Dame Shirley Porter look like Octavia Hill. My hon. Friend will, no doubt, continue to fight that battle.

I return to the issue of the dividing line on social housing. The message coming through extremely strongly from the practice in Hammersmith, from the statements made by Westminster council's deputy cabinet member for housing and from many Conservative think-tanks and supporting politicians is that social housing is the fundamental problem. Even the Leader of the Opposition's introduction to Conservative housing policy talks about families being trapped in social housing. The language repeated again and again in such texts implies that tenants are second-class citizens. It equates social housing with deprivation and loss of status. The implication is that tenants should be ashamed. I deplore that, because social housing should be a choice and tenure is not a matter of morality. People in social housing may not be there for life. Obviously, with home ownership being so desirable because of the equity return over the years, many people want to leave their social housing at some point, when they can do so, and enjoy the benefits of home ownership. However, when and while they are tenants, they are not in some way morally inferior because of the exercise of that choice.

The thrust of the argument emerging from the Conservatives is focused on security of tenure. Tenants everywhere should be very worried about that emerging thinking because, as is well researched and documented, the loss of security of tenure has a devastating effect on communities and on the lives of the people it affects. There is a litany of policy in Conservative thinking that would do untold damage to neighbourhoods and families. It would also lead to additional expenditure being incurred by the public purse, particularly through housing benefit when tenants, whether in social housing or forced into the private sector, have to pay higher rents that must be picked up elsewhere by the public purse.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend must be aware from her constituency that the transient nature of communities where the majority of people are in private rented accommodation leads to fractured communities, a diminution of community life, and a less satisfactory form of existence than for those who have security of tenure in council and housing association properties.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly why housing associations grew up in the first place—to meet the needs of vulnerable people who were forced into the private rented sector and whose lives were damaged as a result.

The emerging thinking in the Conservative party is extraordinarily damaging. It threatens market rents for tenants and the loss of security of tenure for tenants. The abandonment of targets and the lack of acknowledgement of the need for social housing, as reflected in the motion, would mean that those people continued to be treated and regarded as second-class citizens, and that their housing needs would not be met. This Government, with their investment programme in the decent homes initiative and an expanded building programme within a continued commitment to affordable accommodation with reasonable rents, have the only solution to the housing pressures that we face.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. I advise hon. Members that the winding-up speeches will commence at 9.40 pm. Several Members are hoping to catch my eye; if they do the arithmetic and exercise self-discipline, all may be successful.

8.47 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to this important debate. I particularly enjoyed hearing the opening speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps). There is nothing that I wish to add to or detract from his critique of Government policy and his exposition of our policies.

My purpose is simply to add some remarks relating specifically to South Cambridgeshire and the application of Government housing policy even in the months still available to them. Much needs to be done by the Government to offset the difficulties that we face in meeting our future housing need. The Minister will be aware that South Cambridgeshire is one of those places where housing need is the most acute, as are the problems of affordability and the house price to earnings ratio. In Cambridgeshire we have never taken the view that we wish to constrain the availability of additional housing supply; we have always actively sought opportunities to match new housing supply to the evident requirement for employment and new housing in our area.

That is why, five or six years ago, we identified additional housing requirements through the county structure plan. In my constituency, we have given up a great deal of green belt. New developments are happening in Cambourne and in Trumpington Meadows. Through the structure plan, we are committed to the development of Northstowe as a new town of more than 9,500 homes. We have always advocated that. We recognised, after an exhaustive process through the structure plan, that that location was the right place for us to take the next step towards supplying a substantial number of new houses as part of a large increase overall. In my constituency, even on our existing plans, we intended to double the rate of new housing in the next few years.

It will be no surprise to hon. Members that, in the fourth quarter of last year, much of the impetus simply stopped. It is vital to regain some of that initiative. The Government can do several things to help increase housing supply and provide more affordable and social housing in South Cambridgeshire. Like others, I have witnessed the number of people seeking social housing more than double during my time as a Member of Parliament.

Some of my hon. Friends have already made the point, so I will not go on about it, that in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge city, more than £11 million disappears in negative subsidy on the housing revenue account—something approaching 40 per cent. of the rental income in South Cambridgeshire. By the measure of housing need, which is the starting point for negative subsidy, we clearly have dramatically rising needs. We also need social housing and I therefore urge Ministers to act quickly to enable us in South Cambridgeshire and in Cambridge city to respond to the dramatic housing need by retaining more resources to improve our existing housing stock and add to it.

Secondly, let me consider Northstowe. The new Minister for Housing told us nothing about the Government's plans for eco-towns in South Cambridgeshire. Despite all our efforts to offer additional sites for major new developments, the Government wanted to wish an eco-town upon us. We said that it was in the wrong place, there was no infrastructure to support it and that it was environmentally unsustainable. The Government wanted to go ahead, we fought and, in the space of several months last year, we defeated the proposal. It went away and I hope that it does not come back. We in Cambridgeshire will decide where best to support new housing supply.

However, I stress to Ministers that, during the discussion last year with the Minister's predecessor but one, we made it clear that we wanted Northstowe in my constituency to be the first eco-town. In July 2007, just after the Prime Minister took office, one of his first proposals, which he set out in *The Sunday Times*, was to build eco-towns. The example that he gave was described as "Oakington in Cambridgeshire." Oakington, which is in my constituency, is the location of the planned new town of Northstowe. We want it to be an eco-town, an exemplar and the first new town of its kind in this country. We want it to go ahead, but that will not happen at the moment. Gallagher, the developer, has backed out and the proposal depends on the Homes and Communities Agency, with Government backing, being prepared to turn it into the first exemplary eco-town. I urge Ministers who are taking on their new responsibilities to consider positively how we can make Northstowe the first eco-town.

If we are to take a rational approach to providing additional housing, the Government must remove from the regional spatial strategy in the east of England the specification that the housing targets are "a minimum". If we carry on as we are, with little new housing being built, opportunistic developers will try to claim that, because we are not on track to meet the housing target in the regional spatial strategy, they can make highly speculative proposals for new house building in highly unsuitable locations at some unspecified time in the future. We will end up with an enormous overhang of designations for new housing in the wrong places, whereas local authorities should decide, with local people's support, where that new housing should be built, with the necessary infrastructure support. I urge Ministers to reject that misuse of language in the regional spatial strategy, which drives that bad effect.

8.54 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), who made a thoughtful

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

contribution and some points that deserve consideration. It was very different from the contribution from the Conservative Front Bench. I agree with the hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather), who has now left, that that was vacuous. Indeed, in my view parts of it were positively dangerous.

I want to focus on a couple of the points in the Conservative motion, because it is important that we rebut them. First, the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) spoke from the Front Bench about the take-up of the mortgage support scheme and the mortgage rescue scheme, as well as the homebuy schemes. His comments were essentially debating points and party political point scoring, and did not give a realistic assessment of the reality of the situation.

I would point the hon. Gentleman to the interesting evidence that the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government heard from the Council of Mortgage Lenders and the Intermediary Mortgage Lenders Association. They said that it was far too soon to judge the success or otherwise of the two schemes to support people facing repossession, because of the time that it takes for people to get through to the end point. The famous two households at the end of the MRS involved individuals whose houses have been bought by a council or a housing association.

The CML and the IMLA both made the point that those schemes are actually about preventing repossession. Much of the benefit achieved by both schemes, including the one that was introduced as recently as April, has been in encouraging those who are experiencing difficulties to approach their lenders straight away. Regrettably, in the past, people having difficulty with their mortgages tended to put their heads in the sand and hope that the problem would go away. They would build up huge arrears and at that point there would be repossessions. The evidence from both of the current schemes is that many people are going to their lenders first and that lenders are exercising forbearance—although partly out of self-interest.

Lenders have realised that it costs a lot for a mortgage company to repossess a property—about £35,000 to £37,000—and there is not a lot of point in doing that in the current circumstances, because they would not be able to sell the property and recoup any losses. Lenders have been persuaded, partly in their own self-interest and partly because of the pressures put on them by central Government, that they should exercise forbearance, come to an agreement with their borrowers and use all possible measures to maintain people in their homes, thereby avoiding reaching the end of the process and having to get the council or a housing association to buy a property.

Simply to cite the figures for how many people reach the end of the process, as the hon. Gentleman did, is to make a debating point. It shows that he does not give two hoots about the individuals involved and does not want to have a constructive debate—and the same goes for his comments about the other mortgage scheme. *[Interruption.]* I notice that the hon. Gentleman is closing his ears, obviously because this is uncomfortable to hear, which will be interesting for everybody out there—not those in the Public Gallery, because there are not many there now, but for everybody who reads *Hansard* tomorrow. They will realise that the Opposition spokesperson is now chatting to the person next to him, because he does not want to hear the debate—which, if I may say so, also demonstrates his contempt for Parliament, as there is little point in having a debate if people do not listen to the contributions of others.

The second point in the Conservatives' motion, which nobody has even alluded to, is the ridiculous suggestion, which the Opposition constantly make, that it is the Government's planning guidance on housing that has led to a glut of flats. There are two reasons why there are so many flats in city centres. The first reason is that local councils have not used their planning powers properly and have allowed planning applications to go through. The second reason is that developers make more money if they pack lots of tiny flats on to a small site.

Opposition spokespeople frequently suggest that the reason why there are so many flats is the Government's rules on increasing the density of housing. Actually, the density of flats in city centres is many times higher than that set out in the guidance on density provided by the Government. The reason why flats are being built is that developers want to make the maximum profit, and that is what flats give them. Previously, they were able to sell the flats and get their money back. Supine councils do not make proper use of the planning powers that they already have to draw up proper local development frameworks that would allow them to refuse planning applications in the first place. It is ridiculous for the Opposition constantly to blame the Government's density requirements and to pretend that local councils have no responsibility in the matter.

That brings me to the points that an Opposition worth their salt should have been making today, because there are some things that the Government need to do more of in order to address the problems before us. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who is obsessed with regulation, made the astonishing point that he could not understand why house prices were falling even though housing need still exceeded housing supply. That is happening because there is no mortgage money. House prices, regrettably, do not respond to people's need; they respond to people's ability to compete for a scarce resource, which bears almost no relation to people's need for housing. Regrettably, many people who need housing do not have the financial resources to express that need economically.

In order to enable more people to gain access to the housing market, we need to free up mortgage finance. That is not within the gift of the Department for Communities and Local Government; it is within the gift of the Treasury. Some very reasonable complaints were raised in the Select Committee about the asset-backed securities guarantee scheme. I cannot go into the technicalities now, but I refer the Minister to the transcript of the evidence. Clearly, certain things need to be done to tinker with that scheme in order to get mortgage finance flowing more freely. That would help shared ownership and shared equity schemes, in particular, and enable people to express their housing need economically.

The Government are taking certain steps to try to get the housing market moving again. Evidence was given to the Select Committee by the two lenders as well as by the National Housing Federation and the Home Builders Federation, representing the housing associations and the builders. All those groupings said that the Government

were doing the right thing, but not enough of it, and that more money should be made available for the schemes. In relation to the asset-backed securities guarantee scheme in particular, they said that it was not just a question of more money, but that the Treasury should be prepared to take greater financial risks. I urge the Government to consider that idea.

The major criticism that the Opposition have made of the Government's steps to cushion businesses and home owners from the effects of this recession is that we are spending too much money, that we have borrowed too much, and that we should be borrowing and spending less. That is at complete variance with what was said by all those who gave evidence to the Select Committee. They said that, if anything, the Government should be borrowing and spending more now in order to try to restart house building, to keep the construction industry going and to ensure that the people whom we represent, and care deeply about, can gain access to the housing that they need at a price that they can afford, either to buy or to rent.

I therefore urge the Government to consider increasing their spending even more, because if we do not spend that money now, the cost that society will subsequently have to bear of the lost opportunity to keep the house building industry going will be immense, as will the cost to the people whom we represent, because more families will have to live for longer in unsatisfactory and overcrowded accommodation. Those costs will be borne by future generations.

9.4 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Housing is an important subject for many of our constituents, and I therefore welcome this opportunity to make a small contribution to the debate tonight. I have raised questions on a number of occasions about the housing revenue account and the negative subsidy. I do not pretend that there is an elegant or easy answer to this complex and difficult question, but many areas of the country are contributing substantial sums of money, which is having a big impact on rents and on the ability of housing authorities and arm's length management organisations to deliver a service. It is not necessarily coming from the leafier or more prosperous areas of the UK. There are areas such as Bolsover and Chesterfield—and even areas such as Barking and Dagenham in outer London—that have major housing problems, but are contributing to the pot. The Government need to come up with some kind of long-term solution, so that authorities contributing a lot of money can plan and perhaps provide some additional housing stock—or at least spend money on reducing the voids.

More importantly, when I talked to the Poole housing partnership, I found that it welcomed the decent homes standard and the money spent on housing stock. It also said, however, that if it had to continue paying the massive sums of money levied, it might not be able to maintain the housing stock in the long term. It might then have to look at some alternative arrangement and become more like a housing association. That would be a pity, because its satisfaction rates are very high. It is empowering tenants, teaching them to do all sorts of things like use computers and helping them with advice on how to deal with debt. The relative income levels of council tenants in my Poole constituency are surprisingly low, so there is a real need, as house prices are very high and social housing is going to take a major part of the strain.

As I said, there is no easy solution, but there is a problem. Many Government Back Benchers have realised that at the current rate of increase, it will not be many years before as much as £1 billion will be raised from tenants' rents and then redistributed to other areas. The Minister said earlier that he would soon come up with a solution; we certainly need one soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) referred to home information packs, which were debated in connection with the Housing Bill. When we raised the question of what happens with these packs, which are time limited, if people do not sell their homes, the Minister always assured us that everything would be swept up when the home was eventually sold—but if someone puts their house up for sale in the current housing market and it does not sell for a while, they might have to provide two or three packs, with attendant costs and consequences. An argument for HIPs might be made in a booming economy, but in a housing market that is extremely sticky and likely to remain so for a while, they are an additional burdensome cost for people trying to sell their homes. They have become an impediment, so if my party gains the confidence of the British people and forms the next Government, it will repeal the HIPs as an important element in the strategy for housing market recovery.

I think that the Homes and Communities Agency is a welcome development. In the current economic situation, it will play a major and important role in kick-starting some developments that have fallen by the wayside. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) mentioned the agency in the context of Cambridgeshire.

Clearly, the Government are doing some good things, but what they have done in other respects is surprising. If someone had asked me in 1997 how many social housing units I thought the Government would provide during their term in office, I would have said, "Well, this is a Labour Government, so they'll provide a lot of social housing." I know that decent homes standards was their priority, but the reality is that the Government's record on building council housing and other forms of social housing has been remarkably poor. The hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) often makes his point with a degree of force and common sense. The result is that fewer houses are available for those who need them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) mentioned armed forces housing. I welcome the recent legislative change to allow members of the armed forces to count for something on housing lists. That is rather a good thing.

The overall housing situation is one of great difficulty. I agree with the Minister that fewer people are currently losing their homes. Given that we have a crash market, many lenders are being sensitive and sensible in their dealings with people, but that is not because of Government policy. As we heard earlier, Government policy has not achieved an awful lot. The Council of Mortgage Lenders has always said that provided that people who are in trouble tell lenders honestly that they are in trouble, it may well be possible to work out a solution. I welcome that.

[Mr. Robert Syms]

As I said during the economic debate the other day, I am not very pessimistic about the long term. I am pessimistic about our levels of debt, but I am not pessimistic about the British economy. I think that it will grow next year. Given the amount of money that the Government have spent, the devaluation and the reduction in interest rates, it would be very surprising if things did not start to move. In the light of some of the initial figures that we are seeing, I think it legitimate to say that the position is stabilising, and will probably improve next year.

I hope that that will cause the housing market to stabilise as well. One of the big differences between the situation today and the situation in the early 1990s is the substantial level of personal debt among households. We know that unemployment will rise, although we pray that it will not rise by too much. People who lose their jobs, who do not receive help with their mortgages for quite some time, and who have credit card debts and other loans, will very quickly find themselves in financial trouble.

Finally, let me point out to the Minister that Dudley is one of the authorities that make a major contribution in the form of negative housing subsidy, and that that issue needs to be considered. We need a formula, which may have to be a compromise. Clearly funds cannot be taken out of central London overnight, but we need some way of getting through the current circumstances. We should ensure that authorities such as the Poole housing partnership can plan, maintain their independence and provide a good service, but we should also have a needs-based housing formula.

9.11 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I welcome the debate, and congratulate both Ministers on their appointments. I look forward to hearing what the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Austin), has to say in response to the debate.

I have the privilege of representing an inner-city community where housing is an enormous issue. Only 30 per cent. of my constituents are owner-occupiers; the rest occupy council, housing association or privately rented properties. The levels of deprivation and overcrowding are extremely serious. I compliment the Government on the amount of money they have given us to establish decent homes standards, improvements in community areas on estates and better estate management—that has been a huge step forward and a welcome development—but there are still many people on the housing waiting list, many who cannot even get on to the housing waiting list, and many on the internal transfer list.

The knock-on effects of overcrowding in producing poor health, under-achievement in education and all the other social breakdown issues are often directly related to housing. We all know of families who are experiencing hard times because of overcrowding, but when such families are given decent houses or flats, everything suddenly starts to look a great deal better. I believe that we—Government and local authorities—must do everything possible to improve the housing situation.

In London as a whole, 200,000 families are living in overcrowded accommodation and 50,000 are living in temporary accommodation. Those figures are horrendous by any stretch of the imagination. The position can be dealt with only through a combination of policies, including a large amount of public investment in housing for people in desperate need.

While I understand why the Government are so sensitive about the issues of home ownership and mortgages, I feel that, since the 1950s, the country has developed an obsession with home ownership, often at the expense of social rented accommodation. There is an obsessive belief that everyone should aspire to home ownership, while council housing is seen as the housing of last resort. I should love to see people being given a genuine choice between renting and buying, with no social stigma attached to not owning a home.

No other country in Europe has become involved in home ownership to the same degree, and no other country in Europe has the same levels of excessive personal debt—largely because of home ownership, or because of the ability to borrow against what were perceived to be permanently rising house values and all the problems that accompanied that. I believe that we should take a rain check, and think it all through a bit more.

Both the Minister and the Conservative Front Bencher are new to their posts so I am sure they will find it difficult to answer all the points raised, but I would be grateful if they tried to deal with some of them. The latest Government statement on house spending includes the allocation of £100 million for new council development. That is very good news, but it will not build many homes. Although £100 million might sound like a lot of money, council places in London cost about £100,000 per unit to develop. That allocation is a very good start, but we have to go a lot further, and a lot faster. We must also recognise that one problem is that, because of the Tory Government's policies in the 1980s of pushing sales of council properties and compulsory competitive tendering for council services, local authorities currently do not have enough skilled architects, planners and all the other expertise required to develop a housing programme, as that has either been sold off or gone away.

Over the past few years in London, it has generally been housing associations that have developed new housing—that is also the case in most other parts of the country. The Minister needs to look at a number of issues in this regard, such as the relationship between housing associations and the Homes and Communities Agency, and the possibility of zoning them because there are some highly inefficient housing associations with large numbers of properties scattered over a huge area and the on-costs of managing them are very high. The housing associations are aware of that, and some of them are undertaking sensible transfers to bring about more efficient management. We also need to look at the democratic running of housing associations, because there is a degree of accountability for council tenants and leaseholders as they can get hold of a councillor or council official, but I do not find the same degree of accountability in some housing associations. Some are exemplary, but others are truly awful in their management methods and their tenants' representation methods, and we need to be tougher with them. They are not private companies; they are handling very large sums of public money and dealing with housing applicants who are nominated to them by local housing authorities.

I started my contribution by pointing out that in my constituency, as in most in London, the fastest growing sector is the private rented sector. In an intervention on the Minister I made the point that my local authority, like many others, now routinely nominates people to the private rented sector because there are no council or housing association places for those in desperate housing need. The rent deposit is paid by the local authority, and housing benefit pays for the rent; and the rent levels are astronomical. I could give many examples of flats in the same council block where, for example, one is council-owned and is paid for by housing benefit of £100 a week and the other has been bought under the right to buy and then rented out on the private market at £300 a week, which is also paid for by housing benefit. The amount of public money we are pouring into the pockets of private landlords is ludicrous; the total is several billions per year in London. The total housing benefit bill in London is about £4 billion; I do not know the exact breakdown between the public and private sectors, but I am sure the unit cost of private rented accommodation is much higher. In the short term, there is not a lot we can do about that, as the private rented sector is providing housing for people, but rent controls in the private sector would prevent profiteering. Above all, we should provide far more places built to a decent standard, because I am shocked and appalled by the conditions of the private rented accommodation in which many people are placed at present.

Members' work at our advice surgeries has made us all armchair experts on housing allocation policies. People come to us and say, "I'd like to get a house as we're a bit overcrowded." I look up and ask, "Any illness in the family?" They reply, "Not much", so I say, "How much? What's wrong with you?" When they tell me, I say, "Yes, that sounds bad." We go through the whole process, and then I might think that they will get a few more medical, overcrowding or sharing points. There is an entire science involved. I wish that that science did not exist; I wish it was not necessary. Within that science, we endlessly change what the priorities are, and two groups of people, at opposite ends of the scale, lose out. First, most local authorities have long since ceased to house single people unless they are either very vulnerable or desperately ill. There are many very aggrieved single people in their 20s and 30s who have chosen to lead a single life—that is their lifestyle choice—but have no chance of getting local authority housing. They have no chance of buying because their salaries are not high enough and they even find it difficult to go into shared ownership. We need to examine the lifestyle choices that people are making and start to reflect them a bit more. Let us move to the other end of the scale. The building programmes of local authorities, housing associations and private sector developers are all ignoring large families—they do exist. We need family-sized housing to be constructed as part of the entire development programme.

Lastly, the Minister has doubtless been made aware of and fully understands all the issues associated with council housing and its finance. He has had plenty of time to get his head round that, having been in the job a whole day.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): Half a day.

Jeremy Corbyn: It takes but an hour.

There are major issues to address. We must review the housing finance system to end what is, in effect, the taxation of council tenants and ensure that the money is fed back to meet the needs of people on housing waiting lists. It should also go back into maintenance and support systems for existing housing stock and into ending the discrimination against council tenants who have freely made a choice not to undertake a stock transfer to a housing association and not to become part of an arm's length management organisation. They should receive public sector support in exactly the same way as anybody else does.

I wish the Ministers well in their new positions. If we do not solve the housing crisis, the horrors of the rise of the far right and of the British National party, and the destruction of so many people's lives because of bad health, educational under-achievement and family break-up, will continue. It is our duty to conquer the housing crisis in this country.

9.22 pm

Nadine Dorries (Mid-Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his new role. I thought he was still a Whip and had got lost, so I was delighted to learn that he has been promoted, and I hope he does very well.

I benefited from right to buy, without which my family would still be living on a Liverpool council estate. When I canvass the housing association areas in my constituency, people always say to me, "We love living here and we love our house. We wish we could buy it. We wish it was ours and we could pay for it ourselves." I wanted to make that point before going on to discuss eco-towns. Perhaps the Minister will respond by outlining the Government's thinking, and what his thinking is as a new Minister, on right to buy. Will that be made available again?

Will the Minister clarify the position on eco-towns? My constituency was targeted to have an eco-town of 20,000 new homes. There was no rhyme or reason to the proposed site of the eco-town. It was in the middle of green fields, next to a lake, in a valley; it was nowhere near any infrastructure, hospitals, doctors, shops, rail networks, public transport or road networks. The proposal was to put the eco-town in the middle of the local beauty spot and that made no sense. As far as my constituents are aware, that project has died a death, but will the Minister confirm that? Can the people of Mid-Bedfordshire say goodbye to the eco-town?

I would like to inform the Minister of a positive effect that the eco-town proposal had for Mid-Bedfordshire: it made residents very aware of the dangers presented by Government house building targets. My constituents realised that the Government could allocate a target and an area and they would have very little say in what was built, how it would look, where it was positioned, how large it would be and whether it would serve any useful purpose. That energised my constituents. I have harnessed that energy and made good use of it, and at a large public meeting we formed a constituency-wide housing committee; another meeting is to take place in September.

We have formed three more committees from that one: a central planning committee to identify where we think housing is needed and should go, the type of

[Nadine Dorries]

housing it should be and the local needs it should meet; a tourism committee, because we would like the growth development targets in Mid-Bedfordshire to be met through tourism; and an environmental committee to examine the impact of housing on the area. The three committees will all report to the central Westminster forum, and we will feed this information into the new Central Bedfordshire authority.

The reason we are doing that is that, as I am sure the Minister is aware, the East of England regional assembly recently published a report in which it stated, having talked to developers, that there should be up to 120,000 additional homes placed in Mid-Bedfordshire. Given that we have only 77,000 homes at the moment, that is an incredible number of homes, and it would more than double the number in the area. As one can imagine, many residents were alarmed about that.

One reason for our alarm was that we sit between Luton and Bedford. I do not know whether the Minister has been to either area, but both are desperately in need of inward investment and urban regeneration. The hospitals, Bedford hospital and the Luton and Dunstable hospital, are based there. The main employers are based in those areas, and they have good public transport, good road and rail links and good bus routes. There are good schools, which are not full, as those in my constituency are. There are doctors' practices there, whereas there are no places on doctors' waiting lists in Mid-Bedfordshire. There are dentists, whereas there are no dentists in Mid-Bedfordshire.

Both Luton and Bedford have large numbers of people who need social housing or are on housing association waiting lists. They have employment and they live in the areas that need investment in housing. Yet, for some reason, the Government have decided that the housing should be placed in Mid-Bedfordshire, between those two areas but with no bus routes, no links, no employment and no infrastructure.

I ask the Minister to let us know why, if he feels that Bedfordshire needs such a high density of housing, it is not appropriate to put that housing in the areas where the people in Bedfordshire are screaming out for it rather than in an area that is mainly agricultural and has no employment and no employers looking to move in. One housing proposal that was halfway through being built in Wixams has been blanketed, and the developers have walked away from it. It is not now being built, for the reasons that I have highlighted. Nobody is interested in the homes, because there is no employment. Can the Minister please inform me why he is not looking at the areas that need the houses to be built?

We are not nimbyist in Bedfordshire. We are not saying, "No building in our backyard, we don't need any." Of course we do. We have a population that is growing at such a rate that we need homes, including social housing, but nowhere near 120,000 homes. As one can imagine, that is an alarming figure, and that is why our committee has been set up and is feeding into the new Central Bedfordshire authority, which I am sure will challenge those figures and challenge the Government head-on.

I should like to finish, as another Member wishes to speak, but first I return to the eco-town. As the Minister knows, there were problems with the sustainability of the proposed town. No decision could be taken about whether it should be targeted at sustainability level 4 or level 5, and what would happen by 2020 when it was built and fully developed. Those are huge problems, and if the Minister answers none of my other questions I hope that he at least can confirm that the eco-town proposal in Mid-Bedfordshire is dead. Is that the last that we will see of it? That is important information for the residents, and for the committee that was formed because they were energised by that unwanted proposal, to take into account in our proposals to the Central Bedfordshire authority.

9.30 pm

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I am grateful to colleagues for listening to Madam Deputy Speaker's requests to keep speeches short so that everybody can take part in this debate.

In welcoming the new Minister for Housing to his inaugural debate, I could not help but note his telling observation that our homes matter more than anything else. That is obviously true, but if people do not have a home, or if where they are living is not adequate for their family's needs, the observation is an empty statement that means nothing. Unless people have a decent home, they cannot say that their homes matter more than anything else.

The 2009 Budget will barely make a dent in the 1.8 million households estimated to be on the waiting list for housing. The £100 million for council house building will produce fewer than 1,000 houses. Some 400,000 children live in poverty, so the Government's pledges in "Every Child Matters" are meaningless if those children have nowhere decent to live.

It is not often that I am almost moved to tears, because I have been around long enough to see neglect and poverty before. But we are now in the third millennium in the fourth or fifth richest country in the world. Short of failure to defend the realm, the biggest sin that any Government can commit is to fail to house our people. The Government of Clement Attlee were recovering from war, but they managed to build council houses. Successive Conservative and Labour Governments also managed to do so for some 45 years. The record shows that Conservative Governments built marginally more council houses than Labour Governments—there was almost a race to see who could build the most. Some 25 years ago, housing shortages had virtually ended and, in my town, there was no such thing as bed-and-breakfast accommodation for the homeless.

When Ministers tell the House that bed-and-breakfast accommodation has ended, they are wrong. I was nearly brought to tears by the sight of three little girls, aged two, four and six, running around the waiting room at my advice surgery. They had done nothing wrong. Whatever problems their parents may have had that put them in bed and breakfast—they are now on their second B and B, in Ipswich, having been exiled to Suffolk, even though the girls' school is in Colchester—the children have done nothing wrong. The cost of keeping that family in bed and breakfast is considerably greater than if they had been allowed to stay in their housing association house, even though rent arrears had accrued. That would have been cheaper and it would not have

destroyed the family—I fear that the next step will be for the children to be taken into care. I hope that that does not happen.

The last two lines of the Liberal Democrat amendment, which can be found on the Order Paper, would have been standard Conservative and Labour party policy throughout the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s. They refer to the need to

"invest in a large-scale homebuilding programme to address the crisis in social housing which disproportionately impacts on the most vulnerable."

If we insert the word "council" for "social", hon. Members will know exactly where I am coming from.

The hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) made a powerful speech, with which I agreed. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) referred to rural housing. I represent an urban constituency, but the consequences of the failure to provide council housing in villages that would enable the next generation of the indigenous population to live there mean that families are quite often driven into the nearest towns, where the housing problems are then exacerbated.

Reference has been made to empty dwellings in both the private and public sector. In fact, there is sometimes not a housing shortage but rather a mismatch because there are so many empty dwellings. In my constituency, the garrison town of Colchester, there are in excess of 200 empty family houses on the Army estate owned not by the Ministry of Defence but by Annington Homes, because the Conservative Government privatised them. The public purse is paying £3,500 a year for every one of those houses to stand empty. What a great tragedy it is that one of these houses could not be made available for the family of the three little girls who are in bed and breakfast in Ipswich. A compassionate Government would do something about that. I ask the Minister and his ministerial team to make urgent inquiries into why those 200 empty dwellings in my constituency cannot be brought back into public use, when the public purse is paying to allow them to stand empty.

Nadine Dorries: The hon. Gentleman mentioned 200 homes owned by Aragon Housing Association. When we have such situations in my constituency, I go to see Aragon, we discuss the problems and they are usually resolved. In my experience, it is a good housing association. Does the hon. Gentleman not feel that he could do something about that himself?

Bob Russell: I would never use the words "good housing association" to describe Annington Homes. I can assure the hon. Lady that the experience of Annington Homes in my constituency for serving members of Her Majesty's armed forces and for those who have bought houses that Annington Homes has sold on to the private sector would not lead me to describe it as a good housing association.

Let me conclude on the question of the Homes and Communities Agency and housing associations. During the course of this debate, I tried to add up the total number of housing associations in my constituency. I got to 10, plus Colchester Borough Homes. Is it not time that we had a rationalisation of housing associations in different areas? The majority of these housing associations do not have any local management. As I am sure that we all know from our advice bureaux, if management is not local, there is a danger that antisocial problems will arise. I urge the new ministerial team to implore the HCA to rationalise the housing associations so that there are fewer housing associations in each location and to provide on-site supervision or management at least within the borough or district.

9.39 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): This is the second housing debate that we have had in nearly as many months. Despite what has been said by Government Members, our first debate focused on the important issue of social housing but we felt that there was more to talk about, as housing is such a vital issue for our party. We therefore wanted to hold a second debate today, in our Opposition time, to highlight the many major issues affecting housing in England. In fact, we called this debate to represent the real concerns and difficulties in respect of housing that are faced by millions of people in Britain—the first-time buyers finding it almost impossible to get on to the housing ladder, the home owners struggling to pay their mortgages and stay in their homes, and the families stranded in overcrowded houses or whose names lie on forgotten waiting lists. Above all, the underlying problem that Ministers never want to talk about is the present depressed rate of house building. As of 2008, it has been lower in every year of this Administration than it was in even the worst years of the Major or Thatcher Governments.

The people we represent face uncertainty and anxiety about whether they will get a home or keep the one that they have. If their circumstances change and they have to move, they are worried about whether they can remain in housing that meets their needs. Yet again, Ministers have talked a good game today about tackling housing issues—as ever, we have a lot of warm words—but I am afraid that the delivery has been sadly lacking. In both the good times and the bad times in our economy, there have been a series of failed schemes, headline-grabbing initiatives and misguided policies. The result is that Britain's housing is in a very sorry state indeed.

Concerns have been raised by hon. Members of all parties about what is happening in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) talked about the challenges faced by leaseholders, and she pointed out that we must make sure that our desire to enable people to get on to the housing ladder is implemented in a sustainable way. That was a fair point to raise.

The hon. Lady doubted the Opposition's commitment to social housing, but I assure her that we would not have devoted two debates to housing if we did not recognise how important the topic was. We may have debates about policy, but we would not spend time listening to the concerns expressed by hon. Members in this House and by people out in the country if we did not recognise the importance of the issue. As a prospective Government in waiting, my party must be able to give people a proper alternative whenever the next election is held, and that means that we must have an informed policy on housing.

We also heard from a number of Opposition Members in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said that communities can come up with good suggestions about where housing

[Justine Greening]

should go. He said that people will take responsibility for discussing how their housing needs can be met, and my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) made a similar point.

Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) is not in his place, but he made some very fair points in expressing his concerns about housing associations. He spoke about the need to make sure that they are accountable to the tenants whom they look after, and he made some thoughtful observations about housing waiting lists and the housing allocation priorities that local authorities constantly have to juggle.

I am sure that we can all relate to what the hon. Gentleman said, but the problem underlying everything is the fact that the amount of our housing stock is so constrained. That is why we have to keep coming back to the Government's lack of delivery on housing. They have been in office for 12 years now, so we cannot say, "Well, it may get better in a few years." All the evidence suggests that there is something fundamentally flawed in the Government's approach to housing policy, as otherwise more houses would have been built before now.

We know that people are finding it hard to get on to the property ladder, as the number of first-time buyers fell to an estimated 300,000 in 2007, compared to 500,000 10 years before. There are also real concerns about sustainability: in 2007, nearly one mortgage in 10 was for 100 per cent. or more, and the problem is made worse by the lack of house building. On average, 23,000 fewer homes have been built every year under this Government, and housing starts this year are at their lowest since the 1920s. Social housing is beset with problems, too. As we heard, there are 1.8 million people on the waiting list. That is the consequence of a steady lack of house building in Britain over the past 12 years.

That is compounded by the fact that people who have accommodation often find it unsuitable. We have 560,000 households living in overcrowded conditions in England, and 200,000 of those households are right here in London. I am sure that many London MPs who participated in the debate today see those people in their surgeries every day. It is difficult to discuss their problems because of the underlying fact that not enough new housing is being built to give them a chance of having a home that meets their needs.

We spoke about the people who own their home but are struggling to stay in it. Repossession claims have soared from 67,000 a year in 1997 to a staggering 143,000 repossessions in 2008. The Government have talked the talk about how to help these people, but the mortgage rescue scheme that the Government launched has helped just two people. Ministers may say that it will take time for the scheme to produce results, but that was not the message last year when it was launched. Expectations have been badly let down by the scheme.

There has been a range of failed housing policies, such as home information packs, which add cost to the sale process and stifle the supply to the market. Only today, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors said that it thought that HIPs had held back the market. As we heard, we still have no definition of a zero-carbon home. The Treasury has given tax relief on 18 homes, but the Department for Communities and Local Government does not know how to define them. Only under a Labour Government could one Department have a definition and another say that there is no definition.

We heard about eco-towns, a complete disaster project that ran into the sands because local people said no. We know that green issues are important to people throughout the country, yet when it came to smuggling in eco-towns through house building in inappropriate places, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) pointed out, local communities will not have it. They want Whitehall to work with them and give them the responsibility for deciding where the extra housing will be. They do not want the top-down targets that the Government have given them.

Let us not forget the disaster of the botched announcement on stamp duty last summer. We have not talked about that today, but if the housing market was under strain up until then, the Chancellor managed to stagnate it with that botched announcement and totally dried up the market in a way that would have been hard to achieve if someone had had to sit down and think about it as a challenge, but the Chancellor managed it.

The range and gravity of housing problems under the present Government and the Department are clear to see. Fewer houses are being built, and there is greater overcrowding, growing waiting lists, falling home ownership and rising repossessions. The Government's record on housing is reflected in the chaos that we have seen over the past week in the Communities and Local Government team. The Housing Minister has gone. The Communities Secretary has gone. Even the Under-Secretaries were moved. They are not here today to defend their record on housing, but given the Government's history of decisions in this area, perhaps leaving their team was the one good decision that they have made so far.

We cannot go on as we are. We can tackle the issues that we have been debating today—get rid of home information packs, take nine of 10 first-time buyers out of stamp duty, get rid of the top-down targets set through the regional spatial strategy, and have local housing trusts that make sure that local communities can decide for themselves how much new housing they have and where it is located. However, we will not resolve any of these important matters until we have a general election. We have had 12 years of failed housing policy. It is time to give the British people the general election that they so desperately need. Then we can have a Conservative Government who can deliver the sort of housing policy that will make a real difference to families throughout the country.

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Ian Austin): I thank Opposition Members for welcoming me and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing to our new positions. This evening's debate has been a very useful early induction for both of us, not least because it has been such a good debate among Members in all parts of the House.

Despite the disappointment about the changes, to which the Opposition's motion refers, I am delighted to be doing this job, because for many people their homes are not just their greatest asset but their greatest source of security and a strong foundation on which so much

else depends: good health, getting a job, building a career, fulfilling potential at school and being part of a community. My predecessor as Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Wright), made a similar point in a similar debate several months ago, when he said that housing brings safety, security, community cohesion, health, life chances, prosperity and a host of other issues. I pay tribute to the work that he did and welcome all contributions that all Members have made today.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing rightly set out this Government's impressive housing record, which the motion before us entirely ignored. He set out also our efforts to maintain and build on that record, despite the difficult economic circumstances. We have been proactive and decisive, learning from the experience of the 1990s about the consequences of delay and inaction. Although the motion finds fault in a number of our policies, it fails to propose any alternative. The Opposition obviously want to criticise our record on housing supply, because that is what they are there for, but they do not tell us that this Government's efforts led to the highest levels of house building in 30 years in 2007-08.

The Opposition's motion also neglects to mention the 110,000 households that have been helped into shared ownership and shared equity through our programmes, and the £29 billion that we have invested since 1997 to bring more than 1 million social rented homes up to scratch. The Opposition also failed to mention the significant strides that we have made on homelessness, rough sleeping and temporary accommodation: statutory homelessness decreased by 60 per cent. between 2003 and 2008; rough sleeping has fallen by 74 per cent.; the number of households in temporary accommodation is down by 33 per cent.; and we have ended the long-term use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation for families with children.

That is an impressive track record. Every previous Housing Minister should be very proud of it, and we are committed to building on it. That is why we have acted proactively and decisively in the economic downturn to help people at risk of repossession, first-time buyers and the construction industry. Our priority has been to help those in financial difficulties to stay in their homes wherever possible, which contrasts with the 1990s, when the Government failed to act while people lost their homes.

My right hon. Friend spoke about the wide range of measures that we have introduced—to strengthen universal support and to bring in specific schemes—and, as a result, the Council of Mortgage Lenders is now expected to revise downwards its forecasts of repossessions. Although our critics clearly want to focus on the number of households at the final stages of specific schemes, they do not want to talk about the real help that families are receiving. Lenders covering 80 per cent. of the market either have signed up to the home owner mortgage support scheme or offer their own comparative arrangements. Thousands of families are getting free advice from their local councils every month and lenders now have to prove to the courts that they have exhausted all other options before seeking to repossess.

We have also introduced new support, in the light of the restricted global supply of credit, to help first-time buyers get a foot on the housing ladder. We have also increased the availability of shared equity schemes and introduced a new "rent first, buy later" scheme. Demand for our existing schemes remains high.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Austin: I shall be responding to the points that were made by those people who were present for the whole debate.

There were more than 6,000 sales under the open market homebuy scheme in 2008-09, and from the experience of the 1990s we know how destructive an economic downturn can be for the construction industry. We cannot afford to make the same mistakes twice, so we have put in place a comprehensive package of support: £1 billion at the Budget; buying up unsold stock from developers; bringing forward funding for affordable housing, including higher grant rates where needed; and the new kick-start fund to get faltering schemes going again. My right hon. Friend clearly demonstrated the scale of the Government's efforts to reduce the damage of the downturn on households and the construction industry now and in the future.

I shall now turn to the specific points that were made in the debate. My hon. Friend—

Justine Greening: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Austin: My hon. Friend the Member for—

Justine Greening: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Austin: Go on then.

Justine Greening: Housing starts are at their lowest level since the 1920s; who does the Minister think is responsible for that? Is it the fault of his Government's failed policy, or of the construction industry?

Mr. Austin: I will deal with that point in due course, but the point that I wanted to make related to my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), who spoke with great eloquence about the impact on families who face repossession, and the position of leaseholders. I congratulate her on the work that she is doing to protect her constituents from a local Conservative council, whose policies were set out in great detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, speaking with a knowledge and expertise that few in the House can match, made a fascinating contribution and a devastating critique of the Opposition's case. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), who has made himself an expert on housing issues, made a thoughtful speech about the state of the housing market and the need to remove the stigma attached to rented housing. *[Interruption.]* I shall move on to the questions asked by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), if I may, but first I point out that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North and the hon. Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) asked questions about the housing association movement. We have set up a new regulator for social housing, the

[Mr. Ian Austin]

Tenant Services Authority, which will drive improvements in standards and place tenants at the heart of regulation. It will also have a wider range of powers to intervene when things go wrong.

The hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield raised a number of questions about the impact of the Government schemes. He asked how many additional lenders had confirmed that they were signing up to the home owner mortgage support scheme. I can tell him that Lloyds bank, Northern Rock, the Royal Bank of Scotland, Bradford & Bingley, Cumberland building society and others signed up to the scheme at its launch. He will be interested to hear that a number of others have confirmed that they will offer the scheme as soon as possible, including the Bank of Ireland, GMAC RFC, GE Money and others. There is no cut-off point by which lenders must sign up to the scheme.

The hon. Gentleman asked about take-up of the home owner mortgage support scheme. It is a new scheme; nothing like it has ever been tried before. It enables eligible households in short-term difficulties to defer part of their mortgage interest payments. Lenders covering more than 80 per cent. of the market have either signed up to offer the Government-backed scheme or are offering comparable arrangements. Both the Council of Mortgage Lenders and the Intermediary Mortgage Lenders Association have welcomed the impact that the scheme is already having on borrowers getting in contact with their lenders to discuss options.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the low take-up of the mortgage rescue scheme. It is targeted at vulnerable households—those made up of the elderly or the disabled and those with children—who would be eligible for help under homelessness legislation if their homes were repossessed. The scheme involves households getting thorough advice on their financial circumstances, and selling part of their home, which takes time. [HON. MEMBERS: "How many?"] More than 130 households have had repossession action against them halted, and more than 1,000 households struggling with their mortgage have received free advice from their local authority. We believe that 6,000 households will be helped over the next two years.

I hate to disappoint the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), but I can only tell her that the eco-town programme was designed to deliver a final shortlist of up to 10 potential locations. However, decisions will be made on the basis of quality, not quantity. I cannot comment on specific areas, but it is not a done deal, and no decisions have been made on the locations in which work will go forward. The other point that she made was about the right to buy, which has helped thousands of families to realise their aspiration to own their homes. The Government completely support it.

Mr. Fiello: I welcome my hon. Friend to his position, and congratulate him on a great start on his first day in his new role. I look forward to hearing him make many more speeches at the Dispatch Box. *[Interruption.]* When I am permitted to speak—

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con) *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 208, Noes 298.

Division No. 144] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dorries, Nadine
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Farron, Tim
Field, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter

Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Main, Anne
Maples, Mr. John
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
Öpik, Lembit
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Redwood, rh Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
James Duddridge and Jeremy Wright

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chapman, Ben
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs. Claire
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Hill, rh Keith
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jories, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, rh Jim
Kumar, Dr. Ashok
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
Mason, John
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John

McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Oiner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Tami, Mark
Taylor, David
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Heppell and Mr. Bob Blizzard

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That this House notes that the Government has put in place comprehensive support to help households avoid repossession, that 220,000 households benefited from Support for Mortgage Interest last year, over 1,000 households have received free advice from their local authority each month since the launch of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme and many more are expected to benefit through the Homeowners Mortgage Support scheme and pre-action protocol; further notes that the Government has helped over 110,000 households into shared ownership and shared equity since 1997 and that demand for HomeBuy remains high; believes that the Government's zero carbon homes policy is a ground-breaking contribution to the fight against climate change; notes that planning policy makes clear the need for more family homes and that the Government is reviewing the evidence on garden development; notes that the highest rate of housing supply since 1977 was reached in 2007-08 and that the Government has brought forward many measures to help the construction industry, most recently £1 billion in the 2009 Budget, including £400 million to unblock stalled development and £100 million for council house building; further notes that regional planning is open and transparent and that regional planning bodies are required to take into account housing need; believes there is no evidence that Home Information Packs have any adverse impact on the market; and further notes that the Government is pursuing reform of council housing finance and the private rented sector and has set up the Tenant Services Authority to raise standards by putting tenants at the heart of regulation.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

LEGAL SERVICES

That the draft Probate Services (Approved Bodies) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 6 May, be approved.—*(Ms Butler.)*

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Flooding (Cotswolds)

10.15 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): The petition states:

The Petition of Moreton-in-Marsh Resilience Group, and others,

Declares that Moreton-in-Marsh is at risk from further serious flooding; further declares that following severe flooding in July 2007 when 260 homes and premises were flooded, minimal action has been taken to repair flood relief channels and also gullies, drains and culverts remain blocked after almost two years; considers that another flood in December 2008, although not so severe, illustrated the threat of more floods into the homes of people in the town; and believes that urgent action must be taken, and quickly, to prevent the town becoming flooded again.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to do all in his power to persuade Cotswold District Council, Gloucester County Council, the Environment Agency, and Thames Water to fulfil their responsibilities to the town and people of Moreton-in-Marsh and to act swiftly to avoid further flooding.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000379]

Bridleways (Canvey Island)

10.17 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Horse riders in Castle Point and on Canvey Island are deeply disappointed by the failure of councillors to help them maintain existing bridleways and get new ones for safe riding. Horse riding is a traditional activity that is supported by local

residents, but seems to be punished by councillors. There are many problems. Riders suffer from obstructions put in their way by the council and from dangers on the roads. I urge councillors actively to support our local horse riders. I thank and congratulate each and every petitioner. They are good people who just want us politicians to listen to them and to enable them to ride their horses.

The petition states:

The Petition of Paula Holt and others,

Declares that the horse riding community of Castle Point, and Canvey Island in particular, is desperate for safe places to ride in the borough, notes that riding at Waterside Farm, the Northwick Road fields and the sea wall between Haven Road and Northwick Road are now all closed to horse riders because of barriers put up by the council to prevent motorbike riders, but which only actually stop horse riders; further notes that we need more bridleways across the whole borough and that this activity provides exercise and much pleasure for all age groups and is traditional within the borough.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Essex County Council and Castle Point Borough Council to review bridleway provision in the borough and to ensure that traditional bridleways are maintained, and new and safe bridleways are provided.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000380]

Aung San Suu Kyi

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Mr. Frank Roy.)*

10.19 pm

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I say how pleased I am to have this opportunity to conclude our business this evening with a few remarks about the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi? She is rightly known and respected throughout the world for the quiet calm and the dignity with which she faces intolerable repression. She currently faces a process that, for the purposes of this debate, we will call a trial, but which, it is widely accepted, conforms to none of the recognised principles of natural justice that we would understand in this country.

I welcome the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), to his new position. I welcome his appointment; we are delighted to have him here. As the secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy in Burma, may I say that we have always enjoyed a fruitful and close working relationship with his predecessors in the Foreign Office and with Ministers in the Department for International Development? I am confident that that relationship will continue under this Minister, whom I congratulate on his appointment. I wish him every success.

The charge facing Aung San Suu Kyi is that of violating of the conditions of her house arrest. If she is convicted—we might reasonably say "when she is convicted", because the purpose of the trial is to obtain a further conviction—she stands to have a further five-year period of imprisonment imposed on her. The irony is that this imprisonment will be for the breach of a condition of her detention, which has already been declared illegal by the United Nations as a contravention of international law and of Burmese domestic law. This illegality heaped on illegality is a particular feature of Aung San Suu Kyi's position, and of the loathsome regime by which she is being oppressed in Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest on and off for 13 of the past 19 years. The process first started in 1989, when the martial law provisions of the time allowed for detention without charge or trial for a period of up to three years. It is a matter of public record that in the elections in 1990, the National League for Democracy, of which she is the leader, won some 82 per cent. of the available seats. That was a remarkable achievement, and an indication of the standing that she enjoys in her own country as well as in the wider international community. It is also a matter of record that the junta refused to recognise the results of the elections, and that at that point, it changed the rules to allow for her continued detention for up to five years.

Aung San Suu Kyi was released from detention—at that point she was under house arrest—in 1995. She was placed under house arrest again, with additional conditions restricting her entitlement to travel, in 2000. I mention the restriction on travel because it is well known that as a consequence of those restrictions, she was unable to visit her dying husband in London for fear of not being allowed to return to Burma.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold) (Con): Is it not an indication of the nature of the Burmese authorities that in the forthcoming trial of Aung San Suu Kyi on 12 June—which, as the hon. Gentleman has said, could lead to her imprisonment for five years—three out of four of her defence witnesses have been denied access to the court? The Burmese Government are producing 14 witnesses for the prosecution, yet she is to be allowed only one. Is it not even more shocking that members of the pro-democracy 1988 movement who are in jail are being denied adequate food? They are not allowed food parcels, and those who have severe medical conditions, including heart attacks, are not allowed any medical supplies. Is that not an indication of the nature of the Burmese regime?

Mr. Carmichael: It is. It is also an indication of the exceptionally unfair, ill-conceived process in which Aung San Suu Kyi finds herself. Speaking as one who previously practised as a court solicitor, I believe that it breaches just about every norm of international law. My only quibble with the hon. Gentleman is that I was told that the number of prosecution witnesses being produced was 16, compared with one defence witness, but the numbers make no difference. What is most obnoxious is the fact that the person standing trial is not being allowed to present her case.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman may be aware that—in 2003, I believe—I visited the Karen ethnic groups in the Burma jungle. Does he agree that while the Government of Thailand should be thanked for their tolerance of the refugee camps just over the Thai border, they nevertheless have a major part to play in putting pressure on the Burmese junta to respect human rights?

Mr. Carmichael: Like the hon. Gentleman, I have a great deal of sympathy for the position in which the Thai Government find themselves. We occasionally hear reports of some activities within the camps that are a cause of concern—for example, the suggestion that refugees are being pushed back across the Burmese border. The point was made in discussions with the Under-Secretary of State for International Development earlier today that the refugees in Thai camps are not allowed to work, which is also a cause of concern. I have to say that it would be difficult for the UK Government to argue that point too vociferously, given that asylum seekers in this country are so rarely entitled to find paid employment.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): The institutionalised inhumanity of the Burmese junta is reflected in the denial of Aung San Suu Kyi's right even to use the telephone, and the frequent denial of her right to medical treatment. Are not those further examples of why, in the final analysis, multilateral action is vital if we are to give effect to the UN proclamation of the responsibility to protect?

Mr. Carmichael: Yes, that is absolutely the case, and it is fair to say that no country on its own can possibly hope to effect a solution to the difficulties currently facing the Burmese people. It has to be said, however, that the one power in the region that might have particular sway and influence is China. Clearly, that country is not minded to promote democracy movements—for reasons that largely speak for themselves—but the opportunity for multilateral action lies in efforts made to influence China to bring a more benign influence to bear on Burma.

Let me return to the history of Aung San Suu Kyi's detention. She was released for a period, but subsequently re-arrested in May 2003 in the aftermath of a horrific attack on pro-democracy activists and herself in northern Burma. Seventy people were killed and more than 100 arrested. Aung San herself was held for a period of some three months in what was effectively secret imprisonment; at that stage, nobody really knew where she was or what she was suffering. Her house arrest then continued until 2007, at which point it expired. It was renewed for a further year until 2008, at which point, with a still further extension having been allowed, the UN intervened to clarify, if any clarification were needed, that the detention was a contravention of both international and domestic law.

It is interesting, although perhaps academic, to speculate on what might have happened if last month Mr. John William Yettaw—a US national, I am told—had not taken it on himself to swim through the lake surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi's house to break into the compound and remain there, giving rise to the charge she currently faces, which is breach of house arrest. That incident shows the Alice through the Looking Glass world that we are in when we deal with Burma. We have here one of the very few examples of a victim of housebreaking finding herself, rather than the perpetrator, to be the victim, or subject, of criminal proceedings.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) referred to health concerns. Aung San Suu Kyi is now being held in prison, as opposed to under house arrest, and those health concerns are real, substantial and widely held. It is said that she suffers from low blood pressure and severe dehydration. I know that the British embassy in Rangoon does what it can to stay in touch and to make itself as fully aware as possible of the circumstances in which she is being held, and I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on what the Government in this country understand her present medical condition to be.

I should also record the appreciation of many of us of the efforts of Mr. Mark Canning, the United Kingdom ambassador to Burma. He recently described Aung San Suu Kyi's trial as a "show trial". He has been allowed one day's access to the courtroom.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that it is not only Members of Parliament here in Westminster who are gravely concerned about the welfare of Aung San Suu Kyi. Last night my local authority, Dundee city council, with cross-party support, backed a campaign to free this very brave lady. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the current trial is no more than an effort to ensure that she is incarcerated before the elections in Burma that are scheduled to take place next year?

Mr. Carmichael: I do, and I think that that view is held fairly widely. The history of Aung San Suu Kyi's detention is a remarkable, albeit perverse, tribute to her strength, and the extent to which the junta truly fears the influence that she could have if she were left at

liberty. The irony is that while she may become physically more frail, politically she becomes stronger with every day that she passes in detention. We should be interested to hear from the Minister whether he has any information from Mark Canning on what he has been able to discern about the conduct of the trial from the limited access that he and other external monitors have been given.

I once heard Aung San Suu Kyi described as

"an outstanding example of the power of the powerless".

That encapsulates rather nicely the point that I just made to the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. McGovern). The real tragedy is that while she herself is a remarkable woman who is widely recognised for her achievements throughout the world, inasmuch as she is a political prisoner she is by no means unique in Burma. It is estimated that there are some 2,100 political prisoners there, and the figure may be even higher.

It is clear that Aung San Suu Kyi's detention is a political detention. There is no question of any criminality. There is also no doubt that the wish to keep her in detention is clearly related to the elections due in 2010. If we imagine the position from the generals' point of view, we can well see why they would want to do that.

It is fair to recognise the strong and effective efforts made by the United Kingdom Government in recent years. I was particularly impressed by the words of the Prime Minister in his contribution to the "64 words" project. We were all invited to offer 64 words in anticipation of Aung San Suu Kyi's 64th birthday next Friday. The Prime Minister put it rather well when he wrote:

"The clamour for your release is growing across Europe, Asia, and the entire world. We must do all we can to make this birthday the last you spend without your freedom."

President Obama perhaps understated the position when he said that Aung San Suu Kyi's detention

"cast serious doubt on the Burmese regime's willingness to be a responsible member of the international community".

It is not often that we would accuse President Obama of understatement, but on this occasion it appears that he did not indulge in any hyperbole.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): My hon. Friend mentioned the entire international community. While it may be no surprise that Russia is no champion of democracy and human rights, does he not agree that it is a great disappointment that a neighbour of Burma—India, the world's largest democracy—has not only failed to provide adequate support for the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi, but has actually given comfort to the Burmese regime?

Mr. Carmichael: Yes, I do. When speaking earlier about the role of China in the region, I was remiss in not referring to India, which could have done—and, indeed, can yet do—a great deal more. I think it is fair to say that the further away a country is from the region, the more diluted its influence. India is part of the Commonwealth, as we are, and I hope that the Minister will do all he can to maximise the benefits from such links.

When the Minister replies, I hope we will hear a bit more about what the Government are doing to build the broad international coalition that we all think is necessary. I hesitate to use the phrase "when Aung San Suu Kyi is convicted" when we are still in the process of the trial, as it offends my sensitivities as a lawyer, but such is the nature of this exercise that we have to be realistic and acknowledge that she will be convicted: the prospect of acquittal is so negligible as not to be worthy of consideration. What measures do we anticipate taking in that event? It seems to me that there is an obvious response: to build this broad international coalition, particularly for an international arms embargo. Everybody seems to support such an embargo, but no matter how strongly they do that, it never seems to happen. Within the European Union, will the UK press for a travel ban to be extended to the prosecutors and judges who have been responsible for this sham of a trial?

In essence, those are our concerns. I know that the Government remain committed to bringing democracy to Burma. I hope that, whatever happens to Aung San Suu Kyi, she will not be left to suffer in vain, and that everything that happens to her will only serve to redouble our determination to bring democracy to that beautiful but benighted country.

10.37 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) on securing this Adjournment debate on this incredibly important issue, and on the responsible yet passionate way in which he made his argument from a very informed perspective. I also thank him for his generous congratulations on my appointment to my new post; I regard it as a tremendous honour to be a Minister of State in the Foreign Office with responsibility for the middle east, Burma and other similar issues. I am in day two of the job, so I hope Members will be tolerant as I respond to the best of my ability. May I also assure the hon. Gentleman that I intend to work very closely with his all-party group, and indeed with all all-party groups who have an interest in my new portfolio of responsibilities?

A number of Members are present who have consistently raised issues in relation to Burma over a long period, and I believe that the cumulative pressure from Members in all parts of the House does in the end make a difference in international opinion. There are doubts about how much that impacts on the regime, but it is important that the House continues to offer oxygen in terms of the political situation and political realities in Burma. I therefore congratulate all Members who take an interest in these issues on continuing to bring them to the Floor of the House.

As Members are aware, in the early morning of 14 May Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested simply for not reporting an intruder. Her trial on these absurd charges began on 18 May. The hon. Gentleman gave a different analogy, but in effect a prisoner is being prosecuted apparently because the prison guards were asleep on the job. Our ambassador in Rangoon—I noted that the hon. Gentleman paid tribute to his leadership on these issues—has reported the following:

"It's difficult to see anything but a guilty verdict...these trials tend to be pre-scripted. All decisions of any significance in Burma are made by the ubiquitous 'higher authority'.

He continued:

"The generals will want to make sure Suu Kyi is unable to play a role in the elections next year."

[Mr. Ivan Lewis]

That seems pre-scripted and pre-destined, and the point has been made by hon. Members. He continued:

"So the betting is on a sentence that extends her house arrest well into 2010 or beyond".

I have no information on the medical condition of Aung San Suu Kyi. I shall inquire into that and write to the hon. Gentleman, and I shall try to find a way of making other hon. Members aware of the current situation, particularly in relation to her mental and physical health.

I am proud that the UK has led, in many ways, the international response to this outrage. We have spoken to EU leaders and members of the UN Security Council. Burma's neighbours, including China, India, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries, are in no doubt that they have a critical role to play and need to use their influence—I reiterate that call in this debate. I wish to pay tribute to the tremendous work done by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Bill Rammell), when he held this portfolio. He spoke up at the meeting of 45 Asian and EU Ministers in Hanoi only last month and he did not pull any punches. He said that the charges against Aung San Suu Kyi were baseless, he called for her to be released, along with the other 2,100 political prisoners who are detained in Burma—those are the ones we know of—and he asserted that without her and other opposition leaders the 2010 elections would simply not have any credibility in international eyes.

In Hanoi and in Phnom Penh, my predecessor spoke directly to Burmese Ministers to urge them to take positive steps to restore democracy. As hon. Members will be aware, and as the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned, the UK is taking action within the European Union. The Prime Minister intends to raise the issue of Burma at the June European Council. On 19 May, the Foreign Secretary discussed further steps that the EU should take in Brussels, and our officials continue to work with EU member states on tighter measures that target the regime. The Government believe that further measures, including financial sanctions, will increase pressure on the regime.

May I return to the comment that the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland made about Aung San Suu Kyi's health? We believe that she is not in bad health, but she has severely limited access to medical staff and we do not have any further information. She is, as ever, a remarkable woman—we would all accept that—and we believe that she is well enough to defend herself appropriately during the course of these proceedings, however unfair and unjust we know them to be. That is the best information we can offer at the moment, but I am certainly willing to provide any further information that I can get to him.

May I return to the UK's contribution? We have ensured that Burma is discussed at the United Nations, including in the Security Council. The UK will be pushing for the firmest of responses, but it is only right on occasions such as this to be honest and frank about the boundaries of the effectiveness of our efforts. For example, hon. Members will be aware that our efforts to secure a Security Council resolution in 2007 following the saffron revolution were blocked, and the current composition of the Security Council means that any binding resolution against Burma is unlikely. Of course, the UK supports the imposition of a universal arms ban against Burma, but we know that an arms embargo requires a mandatory chapter 7 resolution.

I am also aware that there are calls for Burma to be referred to the International Criminal Court. Appalling and unforgivable crimes are undoubtedly being committed in Burma as we speak, but that country is not party to the Rome statute, and again a Security Council resolution would be required. We believe that it is incredibly important that we focus on practical measures that will convince the regime to choose the path of reform and national reconciliation.

What we have achieved so far is two unprecedented presidential statements, and we should regard that as positive. Two weeks ago, the Security Council expressed its concern about the arrest and called for political prisoners to be released and involved and engaged in the political process. As the hon. Gentleman said, we know that President Obama and the Secretary of State in the American Administration share our concern for Burma, and recently US sanctions against the regime were renewed.

Although it is right that there be a focus on Aung San Suu Kyi, the hon. Gentleman rightly made the point that she is one of more than 2,100 political prisoners in Burma. People have been imprisoned for up to 65 years simply for asking for help for cyclone victims—an appalling state of affairs.

Another crucial requirement for national reconciliation has to be the involvement of all ethnic groups in Burma. The UK has condemned the continuing human rights abuses that ethnic groups in Burma have suffered. Recently, we received worrying reports about the situation in Karen state, which the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) referred to. Thousands of people have been forced to flee to Thailand because of an offensive by the Burmese army, and tragically there have been a number of civilian casualties. Violence in Karen state can only prolong the suffering of the Karen people.

The Rohingya people are abused in Burma, and abused as refugees throughout the region. We have drawn the attention of the international community, including the United Nations Human Rights Council, to the plight of minorities. The conflicts with the Karen community and others are regrettable consequences of the regime's attitude to the people of Burma. The full and equitable participation of Burma's ethnic groups in the political process has to be the key to a durable, sustainable solution to its problems.

I refer to my previous responsibilities in saying that the way in which we respond to the humanitarian crisis is equally important. We are the biggest donor of humanitarian aid to Burma. On top of our contribution to cyclone relief of £45 million, we intend to spend another £25 million on aid to the people of Burma this year.

There is a worldwide public campaign calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. The Prime Minister and global leaders have added their weight to that of millions who have spoken out about the plight of Burma.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister undertake on behalf of the British Government to make renewed representations to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, that one of his utmost priorities

should be to talk to the Burmese regime, and indeed the Chinese regime, to see how this tyranny can be ended? What we have heard in the House this evening is totally unacceptable according to all international norms of human behaviour.

Mr. Lewis: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I hope to meet the Secretary-General next week, although that is not confirmed, and of course this will be one of the major issues that I raise. We believe that it is very important that he use his good offices and reputation to intervene in a way that will change the dynamic of the country. His office and his role are absolutely crucial to securing progress, so if I am able to meet him next week, I intend to raise this specific matter.

We are in an interesting time in our domestic political scene, and at a time like this one might think that the Prime Minister would have other things on his mind. However, hon. Members should know the level of his focus on and concern about this issue. He feels personally engaged in what has happened to Aung San Suu Kyi. He regards her as a fellow leader in the international community—

10.49 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

House of Commons

Wednesday 10 June 2009

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Low Carbon Industries

1. **Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What recent meetings he has had with ministerial colleagues on new employment and training opportunities in low carbon industries in Wales. [278174]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): It is nice to be back, even though my appointment was marked by an earthquake a few miles from my home. May I also pay tribute to my close friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), one of Wales's outstanding politicians? We have followed each other in and out of this job for 10 years. He had regular such meetings with ministerial colleagues—in particular through the National Economic Council—and I will continue to do so.

Albert Owen: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I welcome him back to his role. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) for the excellent contribution that he has made in government to Wales and to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Last Friday, I attended a skills building competition at Coleg Menai in my constituency, where I saw at first hand young craftsmen and students learning and developing skills for the future. Does the Secretary of State agree that Wales is well placed to be at the forefront of the green revolution to come, and does he further agree that we need a skills sharing strategy to build a pool of skills in energy generation for the future, including renewables, clean coal and nuclear power?

Mr. Hain: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who is an outstanding Member of Parliament for his constituency. I am aware of the excellent training opportunities available at Coleg Menai, which have been achieved through additional funding of £4 million from the Welsh Assembly Government for its energy and fabrication centre. That funding would be slashed if the Conservative party ever got into power.

Jenny Willott (Cardiff, Central) (LD): Last year I surveyed businesses in Cardiff that install and develop renewable technologies. The overwhelming majority said that business was falling because it was so difficult for families to get grants to install those technologies in their homes and people could not afford them. Since then, access to those grants has become even more difficult. Will the Secretary of State liaise with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that more money is available for families to install such technologies in their homes, so that we can ensure that this key Welsh industry can be developed and grow further?

Mr. Hain: I very much agree with the hon. Lady that the more funding we can get to assist people to put renewable energy installations into their homes the better, but of course the UK budget under this Government provided an extra £1.4 billion in additional support for the low carbon economy. She may know that the Welsh Assembly Government have invested some £4.5 million in the Carbon Trust to help it to develop its business plan. All of that funding is part of our investment programme driving forward our objective of a low carbon economy.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): I, too, congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his return. He knows that I thought that it was utterly unjust that he was pushed out of office on trumped-up charges; it is good that he has now proved his innocence and returned to the Front Bench.

Montgomeryshire is a pioneer in low carbon industry through the work of the Centre for Alternative Technology. However, it is concerned that local authorities in Wales spend less on school maintenance and upkeep than any other council service, to the detriment of the environment. How can we expect to instil a sense of environmental responsibility and global citizenship if the next generation is being taught in schools that are environmentally not fit for use?

Mr. Hain: The answer may well be to get a Labour county council, to provide the additional funding. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and for the support that I have had across the House. He raises an important question, and if there is any other help that I can give him in securing his objectives I will be happy to do so.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): As this could be the last time that I am at the Dispatch Box under your auspices, Mr. Speaker, may I take this opportunity to thank you for your courtesy towards me and my Front-Bench team and for your service to this House, and to wish you well?

In welcoming the return of the new Secretary of State, I also wish to express my admiration for his predecessor. I have enjoyed working with the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy), a decent and straightforward man. We will miss his common sense and dedication to Wales. I wonder what sort of Prime Minister we have, who can so easily dispense with his services.

In January the Government announced a £2.3 billion scheme for the car industry, including £1 billion to help it develop low carbon technologies. The German, French

and Italian Governments have all delivered on their schemes. What has happened to the money for British and Welsh companies, and why are they the last to receive the help that was promised?

Mr. Hain: The money is coming through, although it would be threatened if the Conservatives ever got into power. I echo the hon. Lady's remarks about you, Mr. Speaker. We have worked together for a long time. I am also grateful for the welcome that the hon. Lady gave me. I have been very fond of her over the years and I was glad to see that she survived the twin gaffes of advertising for a researcher for whom knowledge of devolution was "desirable but not necessary", and letting the cat out of the bag on plans to reverse the devolution of higher education.

Port Security

2. **Mr. Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on levels of border security at Welsh ports. [278175]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Wayne David): Recently, the number of staff at ports of entry into Wales has increased significantly. The UK Border Agency has recently reopened its office at Pembroke Dock.

Mr. Crabb: I thank the Minister for that reply. I, too, would like to welcome the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) back to this important office of state. He will be aware that since he last held that office, operations have begun at the first of two major liquefied natural gas facilities at Milford Haven and work has begun on the new 2,000 MW power station at Pembroke. Near the port of Milford Haven, a major concentration of vital energy infrastructure is emerging, comprising important oil, gas and power facilities. Will he give a commitment today that he will sit down with the new Home Secretary to discuss security arrangements at the port and, in particular, consider the level of resourcing for Dyfed-Powys police, who are operating under severe financial constraints? The security burdens created by the new power facilities and energy infrastructure are creating an additional burden for them.

Mr. David: The hon. Gentleman referred to the new liquefied natural gas terminals—I am glad that he welcomed them—and to the new power station that will be built there in the near future. As he said, construction has already commenced. That is a tremendous boost to the local economy, and I am glad that he recognises its importance. Obviously, the issue that he raised about policing and potential counter-terrorist threats is an important one. Discussions have already taken place with my right hon. Friend's predecessor, and they will continue to take place. The hon. Gentleman can be certain that we are mindful of the importance of the matter and that we will do our utmost to ensure that proper protection is installed for the areas to which he referred.

Mrs. Siân C. James (Swansea, East) (Lab): What discussions has my hon. Friend had with representatives of the Welsh Assembly Government regarding ports in Wales and rail links, particularly in constituencies such as mine, where the docks are so important and where there are competing needs on rail and freight matters?

Mr. David: My hon. Friend has referred to another important issue. It is vital for the port of Swansea, which is a dynamic and vital part of the south Wales economy, to be fully integrated into the transport network of south Wales as a whole. I know that the Welsh Affairs Committee, of which my hon. Friend is a member, will be studying this issue in the near future and plans to visit different parts of the European Union to learn lessons. It is vital that we move as quickly as we can towards having a comprehensive, integrated and intermodal transport system in south Wales and throughout Wales as a whole.

Mr. David Jones (Clwyd, West) (Con): Port security in Wales is the joint responsibility of the four Welsh police forces, but the chief constable of North Wales has suggested that national standards for counter-terrorism policing are forever unattainable. Does the Minister acknowledge that the current fragmented model for policing our ports is no longer adequate, and will he urge the Home Secretary to listen to the advice of Lord Stevens, who has concluded that only a dedicated national border security force can protect our ports properly?

Mr. David: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that greater integration is already taking place. We have seen changes with regard to the UK Border Agency, and in Pembroke Dock, for example, which the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mr. Crabb) mentioned, we are seeing that integration taking place. We have seen, before our very eyes, members of staff being trained in a range of activities so that they can comprehensively fulfil their role. In Wales as a whole, greater co-operation and co-ordination between police forces is vital. That is firmly on the agenda, and both the Wales Office and the Home Office fully endorse it.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware of the vital role that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs plays in protecting our borders and ports. Would he be willing to seek a meeting with the Treasury about the confusion that reigns about moving Swansea staff into the high street in Swansea, together with staff from Llanelli, leaving an underused office in Llanelli? Perhaps that could be reconsidered.

Mr. David: Reorganisation is taking place. Streamlining must occur, and we must have the most effective service that we can provide. At the same time, we must ensure that resources are effectively used. I understand the concern referred to by my hon. Friend, and I give a commitment to meet her and any other colleagues who wish to meet, so that we can discuss how the situation can be expedited as quickly as possible.

Manufacturing

3. **Sir Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister on prospects for the manufacturing sector in Wales. [278176]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): I had my first meeting with the First Minister on the Welsh economy on Monday. I intend to work closely with the Welsh Assembly Government and ministerial colleagues to ensure that the manufacturing sector, which is so vital to Wales, receives all the help that is needed to come through the global crisis as strongly as possible.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: Welcome back! Way back in 2005, CBI Wales warned that manufacturing in Wales was continuing on a downward trend. More recently, Professor Pham of the Cardiff School of Engineering has argued that a weakness in the Welsh economy—the fact that it is dominated by small businesses—has inhibited the growth of a strong research and development base. That is a serious point. Does the Secretary of State agree with Professor Pham, and what can be done to rectify that problem in the Welsh economy?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's welcome, and I acknowledge that he has shown a long and committed interest in supporting manufacturing. He may be interested to know that the latest report from the Engineering Employers Federation shows a slight improvement in the Welsh manufacturing sector, with Welsh manufacturers expecting an improvement over the next three months. He may also be encouraged to know that the latest report by the Purchasing Managers Index shows that total business activity has increased for the first time since May 2008, with growth in Wales greater than the UK-wide trend.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will remember the pleas that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) made in 1997 for our area to be covered by objective 1 funding. Does he agree that that funding has been important for the whole of the western part of Wales? Does he still wonder why the Secretary of State in post before that date did not apply for objective 1 funding so that Wales could have benefited a lot earlier than it did?

Mr. Hain: I certainly do remember the powerful case that my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) made in representing their constituencies and in persuading me that objective 1 funding should be extended to Denbighshire. Indeed, she is quite right: the shadow Health Secretary announced on the "Today" programme only this morning plans for a 10 per cent. cut in departmental expenditure limits for all Departments except those covering health, international aid and schools. That would mean savage cuts in spending in Wales, and would also put the whole of the European convergence programme, which has done so much for west Wales and the valleys, in jeopardy.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank you for your kindness over the years—even though you have occasionally confused me with the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams). I also welcome back to his former post the Secretary of State, who faces greater challenges now than ever before. I should also like to thank his predecessor, who was kind enough to meet representatives from a group of manufacturing companies in my constituency.

Manufacturing is key to the Welsh economy, but Experian recently released a report that suggested that 350,000 manufacturing jobs would be lost across the UK between now and 2010. We know that a significant proportion of those losses will affect Wales's already battered manufacturing sector. On his return to the Cabinet, will the Secretary of State make protecting Welsh manufacturing jobs his No. 1 priority? The last thing we want to see is whole communities left on the scrap heap, as happened in the 1980s and 1990s.

Mr. Hain: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I shall certainly be happy to work with him. I know that the sort of manufacturing that still exists in his constituency is very important. It tends to be made up of small and medium-sized enterprises that need all the support that they can get. I also thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. I do not know who was the more prejudiced by the confusion between him and the hon. Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams).

2012 Olympics and Paralympics

4. **Dr. Hywel Francis** (Aberavon) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues and the Welsh Assembly Government on the establishment of training camps in Wales in preparation for the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. [278177]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Wayne David): I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues in both the UK and the Welsh Assembly Government on a range of issues, including how Wales can benefit from the 2012 games. Wales has already developed an international reputation for hosting successful major sporting events, and that is reflected in the fact that the Australian Paralympic committee has decided to come to Wales.

Dr. Francis: I thank the Minister for that reply, and welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State back to his former position. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) for the work that he did in that post.

An important feature of the recent report from the Welsh Affairs Committee on the Olympics and Paralympics is the significance that it attaches to the pre-games training camps and the legacy for sporting excellence that they might provide. There are now 31 designated centres across Wales: that is praise indeed for the facilities that exist already, and also for the ones—such as the Glyncorrwg mountain bike centre in my constituency—still to come. Will my hon. Friend the Minister agree to visit some of those centres, and encourage the Minister for the Olympics to do so as well, so that more Olympic and Paralympic teams will come to Wales? He mentioned the example of the Australian Paralympic team that will be based in Wales—and the New Zealand Paralympic team, too, will be based in Swansea.

Mr. David: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution, and for the question that he has just asked. I also thank the Welsh Affairs Committee for the excellent work that it has done, particularly on this important issue. As he knows, the Government are four-square behind all efforts to ensure that Wales derives the greatest benefit from the Olympic games, which are for Britain as a whole,

and that includes us. Some 32 sites have been shortlisted for use as pre-games training camps, which demonstrates the commitment and involvement. I also welcome his suggestion that I might visit some of those; I would be happy to do so.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Like the Minister, I am disappointed that Wales has failed to attract more Olympic events when we have so much to offer international sport. Does he agree that the Welsh Assembly Government's decision, at short notice, to renege on their agreement to fund the Wales Rally GB undermines the attractiveness of Wales as an international sporting venue and could result in a much larger bill? Given his new Secretary of State's remarks as a Back Bencher, will he now ensure that his right hon. Friend gets that decision reversed before more damage is done to Wales's international reputation?

Mr. David: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, on which discussions are continuing. I can tell her that the Secretary of State has already raised it with the First Minister of the Welsh Assembly Government. The important thing that I wish to stress is that, in general, Wales is benefiting from a range of different sporting activities. For example, it hosted the rugby world cup in 1999, the FA cup finals from 2001 to 2006 and rugby's Heineken cup finals, to name but a few, and of course the Ryder cup is coming in the near future. All those events are important, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that Wales stays centre stage in a sporting sense.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): I ask my question in my capacity as the joint chair of the all-party group on racing and bloodstock industries. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Ffos Las on the opening of the new race course there, which is being put forward as a possible equestrian centre for international teams taking part in horse racing events?

Mr. David: Yes, I certainly offer congratulations as my hon. Friend suggested. It is important that we recognise that sport, and Wales's involvement in it, should be as broadly based as we can possibly make it, and I shall ensure that that is the case.

Patagonia

5. **Hywel Williams** (Caernarfon) (PC): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the policy of UK Border Agency staff at airports towards people from Welsh-speaking communities in Patagonia wishing to enter the UK in order to visit Wales. [278178]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Wayne David): The United Kingdom welcomes Patagonians who are visiting Wales. We welcome the fact that they are keen to explore their Welsh heritage, and of course the UKBA does not have any separate policy in relation to Welsh-speaking people from Patagonia.

Hywel Williams: I thank the Under-Secretary of State for that answer. Does he share my outrage, and that of people throughout Wales, including my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), at the treatment of a young Patagonian visitor, Miss Evelyn Calcabrini? She travelled for 35 hours to get to Heathrow, but was summarily ejected and sent back. She is not the only young Welsh Patagonian who has, unfortunately, suffered summary ejection for no good cause that I can see. Will the Under-Secretary therefore use his good offices to facilitate a meeting between myself, my hon. Friend and the immigration Minister, so that this disgraceful stain on our welcome to Welsh Patagonians can be remedied once and for all?

Mr. David: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. I am aware of the concerns that he and the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) have about the matter. I give my commitment that the Secretary of State and I will meet the relevant Home Office Minister as soon as possible. Clearly the issue is important, and we want it sorted out as quickly as possible.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): May I, through the Minister, congratulate his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on his return to the Front Bench, and also wish the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Mr. Murphy) all the best for the future?

The point on the subject of the question has been well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon (Hywel Williams). The Minister knows of the historical cultural connection between Patagonia and Wales. The young woman in question had every right to stay for six months to brush up on the Welsh language. I am grateful for the commitment that the Minister and his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State have given, and I look forward to having a very early meeting with the Minister for Borders and Immigration.

Mr. David: We have already had a conversation about the issue, as the hon. Gentleman knows. Obviously, I cannot refer in any great detail to the case that he cites, but I underline the fact that it is important that the cultural links between Wales and Patagonia be enhanced. We should make sure that everything is done to ensure that free movement can take place.

David T.C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): As somebody who has consistently opposed the Government's policy of unlimited immigration, may I say how horrified I was that the young lady in question was turned back for no good reason? May I ask the Minister to ensure that amends are made in some way, and to ensure that she is given the welcome to learn Welsh in Wales that she deserves?

Mr. David: As I just said, it is important that we have the greatest possible cultural interchange between Wales and Patagonia; that is of both historical and contemporary importance. It would not be right for me to go into any great detail about the particular case to which hon. Members have referred, but I underline the commitment that I have made to make sure that meetings take place. We hope that the situation can be resolved and will not arise again.

Welsh Economy

7. **Ann Winterton** (Congleton) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister on prospects for the Welsh economy. [278180]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): We are determined, together, to deliver all the help we can to businesses and employees, and to build a stronger economy for the recovery to come.

Ann Winterton: Unemployment is higher, and is growing more rapidly, in Wales than in England, Northern Ireland or Scotland. Men have been affected most adversely, and young people between 25 and 34 have experienced the highest percentage increase in unemployment. What discussions will the Secretary of State have with the first Minister about trying to alleviate the problem, especially as those with no qualifications are the most vulnerable in the market?

Mr. Hain: I would point out to the hon. Lady that there are already 120,000 more jobs in Wales than there were when we came into power in 1997. There are serious unemployment problems, but I ask her to consider how those problems could be addressed by the Conservatives' plans to cut Labour's guarantee that all 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed for a year will receive either a job or training, to cut this year's £60 cash boost for pensioners, and to cut support for families who are under real pressure, and who need to defer interest payments so that they do not lose their homes. I understand her concern, but her policies would cut all support for all those seeking to get a job.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Yesterday Lord Mandelson announced the backdating of the trade credit insurance scheme to October 2008. That will be a huge opportunity for the Welsh manufacturing industry to move forward. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming that move, which demonstrates the Labour Government's commitment to supporting the Welsh economy?

Mr. Hain: I certainly will, particularly with regard to the furniture industry in my hon. Friend's constituency. I know that she will agree that the employment prospects and economic prospects in her constituency can only have been enhanced by the Prime Minister's outstanding leadership of the world at the G20 summit, at which he led the world in a rescue from the global crisis. It is that outstanding leadership that we want to see continue, taking Britain forward; we do not want to be plunged into the terrible cuts that the Conservatives plan for the British economy.

Broadband

8. **Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Assembly Government and ministerial colleagues on policy to provide a universal service for broadband in Wales by 2012. [278181]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Wayne David): I have met stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors across the United Kingdom, including Wales. The purpose has been to consult on digital inclusion, in both a social and a geographic sense. The UK and Welsh Assembly Governments are committed to achieving a digital Britain with a universal broadband service for all of the United Kingdom, including, of course, Wales.

Mark Williams: The Minister will be aware of the success of the Assembly's RIBS—regional innovative broadband support—programme and the six communities, including Cilcennin in Ceredigion, that are part of that project. Will he make the strongest possible representations to the Assembly Government to extend that project, and will he work with BT and the Assembly Government? The universal service commitment is some way from being met and there is real impatience, particularly on the part of small businesses.

Mr. David: The hon. Gentleman is correct in pointing to the work already being done with regard to his constituency. I know that BT, for example, is closely involved in the work being carried out. There is a good partnership on the issue between ourselves in London and the Welsh Assembly Government. We must make sure that that partnership is rolled forward, and that we achieve our commitment to universal connection as quickly as we can. With regard to the hon. Gentleman's constituency, I give a personal commitment to take a particular interest and to make sure that that comes about.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [278778] **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 10 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Andrew Selous: Our specialist hospitals are the jewels in the NHS crown, but unfortunately their knowledge and expertise are not always passed on to district general hospitals, which means that some patients undergo inappropriate operations which later have to be reversed by specialist hospitals, or even worse, are prevented from having operations which could free them from pain. Could the Prime Minister spare just 10 minutes to meet the chair of the federation of specialist hospitals to see how matters could be improved?

The Prime Minister: Of course I will, and I think he will understand, as I will understand, that that depends on proper investment in specialist hospitals. He will be as concerned as I am by the remarks of the shadow Health Secretary that he will cut spending in the vital areas that are important to our country. The shadow Health Secretary said that he would review the national health's organisations on a "zero basis". He said he wants to ensure that the unit costs considerably reduce, rather than increase. He said this morning that he wants a 10 per cent. reduction in the departmental limits. Before the Conservatives ask for more spending on the health service, they should talk to the shadow Chancellor and the shadow Health Secretary.

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister affirm the Labour Government's commitment to maintaining funding for public services such as housing, universities, police, law and order, transport and pensions, and reject the Tory party policy of a 10 per cent. across the board cut, which would take this country back to the worst days of Thatcherism?

The Prime Minister: Specifically, this morning the shadow Health Secretary spoke of

"over three years after 2011 a 10 per cent. reduction in the departmental expenditure limits for other Departments. It is a very tough spending requirement indeed."

He said that the job of the shadow Chancellor was to be clear about where the spending restraints bite. There can be no doubt that the choice, whenever it comes, is between a Government who are prepared to invest in the future and a Conservative party that will cut.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): When even the old-timers are reading out the Whips' handout questions, we know things are really bad for the Government. May I say how pleased I am to see the Prime Minister in his place? Let me be clear about what we think of electoral reform. We want to keep the existing system. We support the link between one MP and one constituency, and we back our system because weak, tired and discredited Governments can be thrown out. We supported the system when we were behind, when we were ahead, when we won, when we lost. Why has the Prime Minister suddenly discovered an interest in changing the electoral system? Does it have anything to do with the fact that his party got 15 per cent. of the vote last week?

The Prime Minister: Finally, after many, many weeks, a question on policy. Is it not remarkable that it has taken that amount of time for the Conservatives to come up with a question? [Hon. Members: "Answer."] The statement that I shall make in a few minutes, after 12.30, will deal with exactly those problems. I have to remind the right hon. Gentleman that there are different electoral systems in different parts of the United Kingdom, in many cases with the Conservative party's support. There is a different one in Northern Ireland, a different one in Scotland, a different one in Wales, a different one for the European Parliament, which is based on proportional representation, and a different one in the House of Commons. I shall deal with the issue in the constitutional statement in a few minutes.

Mr. Speaker: Mr. Eric Illsley. *[Interruption.]* My apologies, I was too quick. Mr. Cameron.

Mr. Cameron: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am sure that you will agree that it is no good the Prime Minister saying, "Wait for the statement," when he has briefed all the details to the press. And, I have to say that, on asking questions about personalities, what is there left to ask when so many members of the Cabinet have walked out because they cannot work with him?

I want to ask the Prime Minister questions about the issue of electoral reform and the process that he intends to follow. On that issue, does he agree that a truly proportional system has massive drawbacks? Did we not see that on Sunday night, when the British National party, a bunch of fascist thugs, got two members elected to the European Parliament? Does he agree with me that that is a very, very strong argument against proportional systems?

The Prime Minister: Let the whole House send the message that the politics of discrimination, prejudice and bigotry have no part to play in the democratic life of our country. Let us all take action together to expose the racist and bigoted policies of the British National party. And, let us be clear that, on the Labour side of the House, we will do everything in our power to show that the problems that made people vote for the BNP are the problems that we are dealing with—on housing, on social justice and on employment. Nobody, however, will support the BNP's anti-Semitic policy or its policy that is even against mixed-race marriage. I believe that the whole country can unite on that.

What I say about electoral reform, however, is that I have never myself supported the policy of proportional representation for a Westminster Parliament; that has always been my view. The right hon. Gentleman has to accept that the policy of proportional representation exists for the European elections, and I do not see a proposal from his party to change it at the moment. He has to accept also that the Jenkins proposals for the additional vote plus PR laid down criteria by which it would be impossible for the British National party to hold a seat—even under the PR system—in the British Parliament, unless it won a constituency seat.

Mr. Cameron: Everyone will agree with what the Prime Minister says about defeating the BNP, and it does mean all mainstream parties making sure that they go door to door and get their voters to go out and vote.

Let me ask about the process, and let us be clear about what the Prime Minister seems to be considering. We are in the fifth and final year of a Parliament, and there have been reports that a referendum is being considered for before the general election. Can the Prime Minister confirm those reports? Is that something that he is considering?

The Prime Minister: There are no plans for that, and let me just say that when the right hon. Gentleman hears the statement later, he will hear that there is an interest throughout the country in what happens on electoral reform. We published a review—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but we published a review on electoral reform only a few months ago. That has led to a serious debate in the country, but we are not putting proposals forward today. If I may say so, I said that he had moved on to policy, but there seems to be an element of self-interest in the way that he is approaching—*[Interruption.]* Is it not strange—*[Interruption.]* Is it not strange, Mr. Speaker—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. It is getting too noisy—*[Interruption.]* Order. I am not getting much help from the Opposition Chief Whip. Maybe I can get a bit of help from him here. It will be a bad day when I have to tell the Opposition Chief Whip to be quiet, but the Prime Minister must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Is it not strange that the Opposition are not even interested in discussing that democratic reform, and that the first questions that the right hon.

Gentleman asks on policy are not about the economy, not about the health service, not about education, not about public services—not about the issues that the public out there know that we and they are concerned about?

Mr. Cameron: I have to say to the Prime Minister that remarks such as that make him a figure of ridicule across this country. Everyone is entitled to ask what the Prime Minister's motive is. For 12 years there was not a squeak about electoral reform, but now that he has been trashed at two elections he suddenly wants to put it on the agenda.

This is all of a piece with the Prime Minister treating the nation like fools—expecting us to believe that the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, South-West (Mr. Darling) is his first choice as Chancellor, and telling us that he cancelled the election because he was going to win it. The Prime Minister said that he had "no plans" for a referendum. We all know what that means—he said that he had no plans to put up taxes in 1997. Instead of saying "no plans", let him stand up at that Dispatch Box and rule out a referendum.

The Prime Minister: I said that I had no plans, and I repeat that I have no plans. Is it not again remarkable? What MPs are being told by their constituents is that they should concentrate on getting the politics of this country sorted out, on getting us through the recession and on building us a better future. Not one question from the Leader of the Opposition has been about the central issues facing our country.

Mr. Cameron: The Prime Minister has chosen today to make a statement about constitutional reform; he cannot complain that I am asking questions about it. The Prime Minister talks about the economy, but let us be clear about what his legacy will be: not the most useless Government that we have had in history—although they are—but the biggest budget deficit in Europe and the biggest that we have had in our history. So let us be clear about "no plans" or "no proposals today", as he put it. A man with no democratic legitimacy, who has never been elected as our Prime Minister, who has been defeated every time the public have been able to vote for him, is now considering trying to fix the election rules before the next general election. Is that not what is happening?

The Prime Minister: First of all, on public spending and deficits, let the right hon. Gentleman confirm that his proposals are for a 10 per cent. cut in most departmental expenditure. If he wishes to raise the question of deficits and debt, let him confirm that the proposal of the shadow Chancellor is now to cut public expenditure by 10 per cent., as confirmed by the shadow Health Secretary this morning.

Let us have a debate about the choice that really does exist in the country: between a Conservative party that now wants to cut, even at a time of recession, into our basic public services, and a Labour party that wants to invest in them. Let him also be honest with the country that when it comes to calling for an election, he has absolutely no plan for dealing with the recession. He has no policies for dealing with unemployment, no policies for dealing with small businesses and no policies for dealing with the problems of this country. He is an Opposition leader who has no plans for government, and he does not deserve to be in government.

Mr. Cameron: One of my plans for dealing with the recession was the same as the Prime Minister's last week—to sack the Chancellor. The Prime Minister might be talking about a second-preference voting system, but the fact is that he is left with a second-preference Chancellor.

On the issue of public spending, let us be clear about the answers that the Prime Minister has given. He said last week:

"Public spending is rising every year".

His Chancellor said:

"I have cut overall public spending".

The figures that the Prime Minister is hawking around are his own figures. He is planning to cut public spending by 7 per cent. in every Department over the next three years. The next election—when he has the guts to call it—will not be about Labour investment versus Tory cuts, but about the mismanagement—*[Interruption.]* It will be about the mismanagement of the public finances, the appalling deficit that he has left and his plan for cuts.

Let me just ask the Prime Minister this question. On the issue of electoral reform, why not admit that the current system gives the country the chance to throw out a Government who are weak, divided and incompetent? That election is what we should be having now.

The Prime Minister: Let me read the figures for public spending, so that there is absolutely no doubt about the truth of what I am saying and that the right hon. Gentleman has got it wrong. Public spending this year is £621 billion; it rises next year to £672 billion—that is this financial year. It then rises to £702 billion, then to £717 billion, then to £738 billion and then to £758 billion. Those are public spending rises. The only party proposing a cut in public spending is the Conservative party.

The right hon. Gentleman is right. At the next election, there will be a choice: a choice between a Government who helped people and actively intervened to take us through a downturn and a Conservative party that would do nothing. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Mr. Robathan, you cannot behave like that. You run the risk of being put out of the House. *[Interruption.]* Order. Everyone has to be quiet.

The Prime Minister: There will now be a choice between a Government who have actually intervened to deal with the recession and a Conservative party that said "do nothing". It will be a choice between a Government who are increasing public spending by the figures that I gave and a Conservative leader who, for the first time in the House of Commons during this Parliament, has now admitted that the policy of his party is spending cuts. That is what he has told us today; that is going to be the choice before the country.

Mr. Speaker: Eric Illsley.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I know you are very anxious to hear this question.

The Prime Minister is aware that Barnsley college has been caught up in the incredible bungling of the Learning and Skills Council over the Building Colleges for the Future programme, to the extent that we have a half-demolished college. Incredibly, the LSC has, yet again, delayed the decision from 3 June on which colleges will be funded. My college is now technically insolvent and has announced 53 redundancies. When will the Prime Minister intervene to sort this mess out?

The Prime Minister: In the Budget, an extra £300 million was put into further education colleges. We are now looking at how we can help the individual colleges that have spending proposals for new investment. Let me remind the House that no investment was taking place in further education colleges when we came into power. We are now investing more in further education colleges than ever before. I believe that my hon. Friend's college in Barnsley is one of the priorities for getting that new investment.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Everyone who has been out on the campaign trail in the past few weeks knows how angry and frustrated people have become about the way in which this Government always raise people's hopes only for people to see them disappointed again and again. Nowhere is that truer than in housing, where we have had more announcements than new homes. Since January, when the Prime Minister announced the biggest council house building programme in decades, only 20 new homes have been started. Will he, just for once, make a promise and actually deliver?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's figures. What has happened since January is that we have put in place measures, first, to protect people in their own homes, so the expected rate of mortgage repossessions has not happened and mortgage repossessions are roughly as they were a few months ago. Equally, at the same time, we are bringing in a programme to invest more in social housing over the next few months and, indeed, over the next few years. I have to tell him that we are prepared to take even more decisions to make available more social housing over the next few months. That is only possible because we have taken the decisions about the increased investment that is necessary at the time of a recession that his party and the Conservative party have opposed. I hope that if he is going to ask us for more social housing, he will support the necessary investment for it.

Mr. Clegg: If that is all true, why are a staggering 1.8 million families in this country waiting for a home—70 per cent. more than when this Government came into power? If the Prime Minister wants to do something now, why does he not stop the Treasury from grabbing all the money that councils raise in rents and sales and allow them instead to use that money to build desperately needed homes? Will he at least do that?

The Prime Minister: I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that there are 1 million more people in homes than when we came into government in 1997. We have also improved houses for more than 1 million extra people. At the same time, we are putting aside extra money for social housing. By 2010, more than £40 billion in total will have been invested in housing since 1997, and we will have made house improvements for 8 million people. We are reducing the number of non-decent social homes by more than 1 million. Since 1997, more than £29 billion has been invested in social housing. We are not complacent, and that is why we are planning to invest more this year.

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West and Royton) (Lab): Since the stated objective of bailing out the banks was to maintain lending to businesses and home owners at 2007 levels, and since the latest official figures just published show that that lending is now absolutely flat—indeed, 20 per cent. down on 2007 levels—when will my right hon. Friend use the power that he already has from majority ownership of several major banks to force the banks to give priority to rescuing the real economy rather than simply looking after their own interests and letting the real economy go hang?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right that the banks have a duty now to lend to small businesses and for housing. Since 1 March they have been under an obligation, as a result of quantitative agreements that we have reached. In other words, RBS has agreed to increase its lending this year by £25 billion. Lloyds TSB has agreed to increase its lending by £14 billion and Northern Rock by £5 billion. Voluntarily, HSBC and Barclays have agreed to increase their lending. The total increase in lending that has been agreed, to come from 1 March, is £70 billion extra over what was available last year. We will begin to see the companies that will benefit from that being able to say that whereas rejections were issued before when they put in applications, they are now having their applications accepted. We will continue to monitor the situation, but I assure him that £70 billion of extra money is going into lending to small businesses and for homes.

Q2. [278779] **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Pensioners and others who rely on their savings are suffering greatly from the low interest rates needed to tackle the recession. Will the Prime Minister explain to them why the savings limit for council tax benefit has stuck at £16,000, when, if it had gone up in line with the retail prices index, it would now be £27,000?

The Prime Minister: In all areas, we have to look at what we can afford at different times. Obviously we have done a great deal for those who are on pension credit, to raise the amount of money that they receive. We have done a great deal for people who are on working tax credit and on child tax credit, to raise the amount of money that they receive. Obviously reform of housing benefit is something that we are looking at, but I think the hon. Gentleman has to accept that 1.5 million children have come out of poverty as a result of what we have done, as have 1 million pensioners. If we had not had the pension credit, the winter allowance and the free TV licence, pensioners would not be as well off as they are. There are many people in other parties who did not support those things when we did them.

Q3. [278780] **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes) (Lab): Last week, Able UK announced a multi-million pound investment in my constituency, which is going to create 5,000 much-needed jobs. It is on the largest development

site in the north of England, on a deep-water estuary. I would appreciate it if my right hon. Friend and his Ministers could tell me what further he can do to secure more economic development in my area and across the country. To that end, will he meet me and my colleagues to look at some of the barriers we still have to economic growth in my constituency, such as—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think the Prime Minister will manage an answer to that.

The Prime Minister: Just for Opposition Members, the latest estimate shows that there would be 500,000 more people unemployed if we had followed the policies of the Conservative party.

At all times, we will seek foreign direct investment into this country. We have given people new allowances so that they can invest now, through the recession, in our future. The only way of making a better future is to invest in the future. That is what we are doing. Unfortunately, our opponents want to cut.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): Parliament stands accused of being ever more distant from the country. Away from the political arena, what does the Prime Minister feel he has ever achieved in the real world that qualifies him to lead the nation?

The Prime Minister: I think every MP should return with a bit of humility after listening to their constituents over the past few weeks. Every MP has learned from their constituents that they want us to clean up their politics and get them through the recession, and they want us to build for the future. That is what I am going to do, and I believe I have the experience to do that.

Q4. [278781] **Mr. Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): In the next two years, Ealing's health services will see an increase in funding of more than £55 million, thanks to the Labour Government. However, is my right hon. Friend aware of concerns in the NHS about a zero-basis review of its budget? Will he reassure me that he will not implement those Tory plans?

The Prime Minister: I can also give the House the figures for current expenditure over the next few years. Including the health service, it will rise from £565 billion to £608 billion, then to £645 billion, £666 billion, £689 billion and £712 billion. That is not a cut, that is a rise in expenditure. The only way that the cash figures will be cut is if there is a Conservative Government cutting 10 per cent. out of the major Departments. This is the day when the shadow Health Secretary admitted that the Conservatives plan 10 per cent. cuts in our vital public services. This is the day when the Conservatives revealed their true manifesto for this country. This is the day when they showed that the choice is between investment under Labour and massive cuts under the Conservative party.

Q5. [278782] **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): In 2007, there were 8,324 deaths in which C. difficile was mentioned as a cause on the death certificate—an increase of 28 per cent. on the previous year. Yesterday, the British Medical Association produced a report, which said that infection control procedures were being damaged through overcrowding and understaffing at NHS facilities. Does the Prime Minister agree that any avoidable death is unacceptable? In the light of the report, what fresh actions will the Government take to eliminate all superbugs from our hospitals?

The Prime Minister: I am determined to do that. We have introduced new rules for nurses, for people being checked as they come into hospitals and for cleanliness. We have given matrons more powers and doubled their number so that cleanliness is at the centre of everything that happens in the national health service. We are determined to root out C. difficile and to deal with MRSA. I assure the hon. Gentleman and anyone who has had personal experience of that happening to any member of their family that we will continue our work to remove C. difficile and MRSA and we have the utmost sympathy for those who have been affected.

Mr. Parmjit Dhanda (Gloucester) (Lab): Does—[Hon. Members: "It is Mr. Speaker."] Steady. Does my right hon. Friend understand the anger among people who work in financial services, who have witnessed millions of pounds being rightly invested in our banks to shore them up, but now see thousands of jobs jettisoned by, for example, Cheltenham & Gloucester in the middle of a recession? Does he agree that the banks need to work with the unions to keep people in work during a recession rather than shedding jobs to pay money back to the Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for his constituents. I know that Cheltenham & Gloucester has made several redundancies, and that is a big issue not only for him but for the rest of the country. I am happy to meet him to discuss those issues, but let me say that we are determined to keep as many jobs as possible in this country and to prevent unemployment where possible, and, when it happens, to give people new jobs. A hundred and fifty thousand new jobs have been created as a result of new investment that we are making in the flexible new deal to enable young people and others to get jobs. Even in the current difficult situation, more than 200,000 people are finding new jobs every month. We will continue to provide that support, but I have to say again that the issue is clear: we are prepared to provide the investment that is necessary; the Conservatives are revealed again as the party of cuts.

Q6. [278783] **Mr. Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): Last month before the local elections, the Prime Minister, in answer to a question from the hon. Member for Gloucester (Mr. Dhanda) about his regional development agency, said that Conservative Members wanted to abolish regional development agencies. We do—we want to give the powers and the budgets to local authorities. He said:

> "We will support it, we will invest; they would make cuts."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2009; Vol. 492, c. 165.]

This week, after those elections, the South West of England Regional Development Agency has made £56 million of cuts, cutting projects in my constituency in Newent and Cinderford and halving the budget for regeneration in Gloucester. Why should anybody believe a word the Prime Minister says again?

The Prime Minister: Thousands of companies in the hon. Gentleman's area are getting help under the Inland Revenue scheme and others that we are introducing.

Thousands of companies are getting special help to take them through the recession. If his argument is that we must avoid cuts, he had better talk to the shadow Chancellor because he proposes massive cuts in services today and in future. The Conservative party has been revealed today as the party that will fight for the next few months on cuts in services. At some point, Conservative Members will have to tell us how many nurses, doctors, teachers, carers and public servants will lose their jobs as a result of the new policy announced this morning.

Q7. [278784] **Mr. David Hamilton** (Midlothian) (Lab): Would the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to Lawrence Daly, the general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers from 1968 to 1984? He was the man who led the Wilberforce inquiry on behalf of the union and changed conditions in the mining industry more than any other individual. He was also a man who loved to sing and loved poetry. The NUM in Scotland—the Prime Minister is an honorary member of the Scottish miners union—is looking to pay a tribute to Lawrence Daly in his homeland of Fife. Would the Prime Minister consider coming to Fife and also paying tribute to him?

The Prime Minister: I would indeed. Lawrence Daly was a friend of mine, as well as of many people. There are few people who did more to advance miners' conditions in this country than Lawrence Daly. He fought for miners' safety in a way that brought about big changes in safety in the mining industry. He fought for miners to get the right to compensation for pneumoconiosis and other diseases. I believe that he and so many other miners' leaders who fought for good conditions in what is a very dangerous industry deserve the wholesale gratitude of everybody, in all parts of the House.

Constitutional Renewal

12.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Gordon Brown): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the Government's proposal to invite the House to agree further democratic reform, including legislation before the House rises for the summer on the conduct of Members of Parliament.

The past few months have shown us that the public require, as an urgent imperative, higher standards of financial conduct from all people in public life and an end to any abuses of the past. There is no more pressing task for this Parliament than to respond immediately to this public demand. Like every Member here, I believe that most Members of Parliament enter public life so that they can serve the public interest. I believe also that the vast majority of MPs work hard for their constituents and demonstrate by their service, whatever party they belong to, that they are in politics not for what they can get but for what they can give.

But all of us have to have the humility to accept that public confidence has been shaken and that the battered reputation of this institution cannot be repaired without fundamental change. At precisely the moment when the public need their politicians to be focused on the issues that affect their lives—on fighting back against recession and keeping people in their jobs and homes—the subject of politics itself has become the focus of our politics. We cannot move our country forward unless we break with the old practices and the old ways. Each of us has a part to play in the hard task of regaining the country's trust, not for the sake of our different parties but for the sake of our common democracy. Without that trust, there can be no legitimacy; and without legitimacy, none of us can do the job our constituents have sent us here to do.

We must reflect on what has happened, redress the abuses, ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again and ensure that the public see us as individual MPs accountable to our constituents. It will be what we now do, not just what we say, that will prove that we have learned and that we have changed. So first, all MPs' past and future expenses should and will be published on the internet in the next few days. Home claims submitted by MPs from all parts of the House over the past four years must, as we have agreed, be scrutinised by an independently led panel. That will ensure repayment where it is necessary and lead to discipline where there have been inappropriate claims. I know that you are working urgently to conclude this reassessment process, Mr. Speaker. We must now publish the past four years' receipts, and start and conclude the scrutiny process as quickly as possible.

The House has already agreed to restrict expenses further, to those needed for parliamentary duties alone, to cut the costs for housing, to require all spending to be receipted and to ensure that incomes from second jobs are fully accounted for. All parties have committed themselves to accept the further recommendations of the independent Kelly committee, once they are received later this year, provided these proposals meet the tests of increased transparency, accountability and reduced costs for the taxpayer. Those steps to sort out the expenses crisis are necessary, but I think we all know that they are not sufficient. We need to go further.

At its first meeting yesterday, the Government's democratic council decided to bring forward new legislative proposals before the summer Adjournment on two issues that have been the subject of constructive cross-party discussion. First, we propose that the House of Commons—and subsequently the House of Lords—move from the old system of self-regulation to independent, statutory regulation. That will mean the immediate creation of a new Parliamentary Standards Authority, which will have delegated power to regulate the system of allowances. No more can Westminster operate in ways reminiscent of the last century, whereby Members make up the rules and operate them among themselves.

The proposed new authority would take over the role of the Fees Office in authorising Members' claims, oversee the new allowance system, following proposals from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, maintain the Register of Members' Interests, and disallow claims, require repayment and apply firm and appropriate sanctions in cases of financial irregularity. I welcome the cross-party support for these proposals, which will be contained in the Bill that we will introduce very soon. I believe that the whole House will also wish to agree that, as part of this process, the new regulator should scrutinise efficiency and value for money in Parliament's expenditure, and ensure, as suggested to Sir Christopher Kelly, that Parliament costs less.

Secondly, the House will be asked to agree a statutory code of conduct for all MPs, clarifying their role in relation to their constituents and Parliament, detailing what the electorate can expect and the consequences that will follow for those who fail to deliver. It will codify much more clearly the different potential offences that must be addressed, and the options available to sanction. These measures will be included in a short, self-standing Bill on the conduct of Members in the Commons, which will be introduced and debated before the summer Adjournment. This will address the most immediate issues about which we know the public are most upset, but it will be only the first stage of our legislation on the constitution.

The current system of sanctions for misconduct by Members is not fit for purpose. It does not give the public the confidence they need that wrongdoing will be dealt with in an appropriate way. The last time a person was expelled from the House was 55 years ago, in 1954. It remains the case that Members can be sentenced to up to one year in prison without being required to give up their parliamentary seat. The sanctions available against financial misconduct or corruption have not been updated to meet the needs of the times. This is not a modern and accountable system that puts the interests of constituents first. It needs to change.

There will be consultation with all sides of the House to come forward with new proposals for dealing effectively with inappropriate behaviour, including the potential options of effective exclusion and recall for gross financial misconduct, identified by the new independent regulator and by the House itself.

The House of Lords needs to be reformed, too. Following a meeting of the House Committee of the House of Lords, and at its request, I have today written to the Senior Salaries Review Body to ask it to review the system of financial support in the House of Lords, to increase its accountability, to enhance its transparency and to reduce its cost. For the first time, there will also

[The Prime Minister]

be new legislation for new disciplinary sanctions for the misconduct of peers in the House of Lords.

We must also take forward urgent modernisation of the procedures of the House of Commons, so I am happy to give the Government's support to a proposal from my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee that we will work with a special parliamentary commission comprising Members from both sides of this House, convened for a defined period to advise on necessary reforms, including making Select Committee processes more democratic, scheduling more and better time for non-Government business in the House, and enabling the public to initiate directly some issues for debate.

Given the vital role that transparency plays in sweeping away the decrepit system of allowances and holding power to account, I believe that we should do more to spread the culture and practice of freedom of information. So, as a next step, the Justice Secretary will set out further plans to look at broadening the application of freedom of information to include additional bodies which also need to be subject to greater transparency and accountability. This is the public's money, and they should know how it is spent.

I should also announce that, as part of extending the availability of official information, and as our response to the Dacre review, we will progressively reduce the time taken to release official documents. As the report recommended, we have considered the need to strengthen protection for particularly sensitive material, and there will be protection of royal family and Cabinet papers as part of strictly limited exemptions. But we will reduce the time for release of all other official documents below the current 30 years, to 20 years. So that Government information is accessible and useful for the widest possible group of people, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who led the creation of the worldwide web, has agreed to help us to drive the opening up of access to Government data on the web over the coming months.

In the last 12 years, we have created the devolved Administrations, ended the hereditary principle in the House of Lords, and introduced the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Human Rights Act 1998. Just as, through recent changes, we are removing ancient royal prerogatives and making the Executive more accountable to Parliament on central issues such as the declaration of peace and war, appointments and treaties, so, too, we want to establish and renew the legitimacy of Parliament itself by its becoming more accountable to the people.

Democratic reform cannot be led in Westminster alone. It must be led by engagement with the public. That is part of the lesson of the last month: the public want to be, and should be, part of the solution. So we must build a process that engages citizens themselves, people of all parties and none, of all faiths and no faith, from every background and every part of the country. So over the coming months, the Government will set out proposals for debate and reform on five remaining major constitutional issues.

First, we will move forward with reform of the House of Lords. The Government's White Paper, published last July, for which there is backing from other parties, committed us to an 80 or 100 per cent. elected House of Lords, so we must now take the next steps as we complete this reform. The Government will come forward with published proposals for the final stage of House of Lords reform before the summer Adjournment, including the next steps we can take to resolve the position of the remaining hereditary peers and other outstanding issues.

Secondly, setting out the rights that people can expect as a British citizen, but also the responsibilities that come with those rights, is a fundamental step in balancing power between Government, Parliament and the people. It is for many people extraordinary that Britain still has a largely unwritten constitution. I personally favour a written constitution. I recognise that this change would represent a historic shift in our constitutional arrangements, so any such proposals will be subject to wide public debate and the drafting of such a constitution should ultimately be a matter for the widest possible consultation with the British people themselves.

Thirdly, there is the devolution of power and the engagement of people themselves in their local communities. The House will be aware of the proposals for the completion of the devolution of policing and justice in Northern Ireland. Next week, the Calman commission will report with recommendations on the future of devolution in Scotland within the United Kingdom. The Government of Wales Act 2006 permits further devolution in Wales, on which discussions are taking place. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary will set out how we will strengthen the engagement of citizens in the democratic life of their own communities as we progress the next stage of devolution in England. So we must consider whether we should offer stronger, clearly defined powers to local government and city regions and strengthen their accountability to local people.

Last year, we published our review of the electoral system and there is a long-standing debate on this issue. I still believe that the link between the MP and constituency is essential and that the constituency is best able to hold its MP to account. We should be prepared to propose change only if there is a broad consensus in the country that it would strengthen our democracy and our politics by improving the effectiveness and legitimacy of both Government and Parliament and by enhancing the level and quality of representation and public engagement. We will set out proposals for taking this debate forward.

Fifthly, we will set out proposals for increasing public engagement in politics. To improve electoral registration, we will consider how we increase the number of people on the register and help to combat fraud. On receipt of the youth commission report, and having heard from young people themselves, we will set out the steps we will take to increase the engagement of young people in politics, including whether to give further consideration to the voting age.

As we come forward with proposals, in each case the Government will look to consult widely. All proposed reforms will be underpinned by cross-party discussions. Our proposals will also be informed by leading external figures, including academics and others who command public respect and have a recognised interest or expertise in the different elements of democratic reform. I expect this to conclude in time to shape the Government's forward legislative programme and to feed into the Queen's Speech. *[Interruption.]*

In the midst of all the recriminations, let us seize the moment to lift our politics to a higher standard—*[Interruption.]* I do not think the House is behaving well today when it is debating its own future and how the public see what we do. In the midst of all the rancour and recriminations about expenses, let us seize the moment to lift our politics to a higher standard. In the midst of doubt, let us revive confidence. Let us also stand together because on this, at least, I think we all agree—Britain deserves a political system that is equal to the hopes and character of our people. Let us differ on policy—that is inevitable—but let us stand together for integrity and democracy. That is now more essential than ever, so I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. David Cameron (Witney) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, but I have to say that he read it so quickly that I am not sure he convinced even himself. He has spoken a lot about constitutional change and innovation, but is not the real change we need not much of an innovation at all? Is not the answer to our discredited politics, to our disillusioned country and to our desperately weak Government a general election?

Two years ago, the Prime Minister did not call an election because he thought he would not win it; three weeks ago, he said he did not want one because it would bring "chaos"; and Lord Mandelson, the man who now runs the Government, says that Labour is against one because it might lose it. How many more excuses will they come up with before they recognise that it is time for people to have their say?

Let me turn now to the proposals themselves. The country is too centralised, Parliament is too weak, and the Government are too top-down, too secretive and too unwilling to give up power. Above all, is not the real problem the fact that people feel shut out of decision making and unable to control the things that matter to them?

There is much in the statement that we support, not least because it is taken from the comprehensive case for reform that I made to the Open university. The Government have at least mastered the art of copying things. We agree with giving more power to local government, but let us not stop there. Why not abolish the regional quangos that have taken so much power away from local government? We support greater independence for Select Committees, which got a mention today, but why cannot the Prime Minister say today that these watchdogs should be freely elected and not appointed by the Whips Office? I accept that it is a difficult decision for the Prime Minister, and in a way it is a difficult decision for me, because it means giving up patronage. However, I am prepared to do it. Is he prepared to do it?

We will back the establishment of a Parliamentary Standards Authority to supervise all matters relating to Members of Parliament' pay and expenses, but there are still serious questions to be answered, not least about how it will relate to the House and to whom it will be ultimately accountable.

The problem is that the Prime Minister has promised constitutional change countless times before. He promised it when he launched his campaign for leadership of the Labour party two years ago, he promised it in his first statement to the House as Prime Minister, and he promised it in his speech on liberty in the autumn of 2007. He promised it in two Queen's Speeches, when he specifically pledged the delivery of a Constitutional Renewal Bill. That Bill was first mooted in November 2007, then again in December 2008. Why has it taken so long?

Let us consider the things that the Prime Minister has proposed in the past. He has proposed a British day, an *institute of Britishness*, a *Bill of Rights*, a *written* constitution and reform of the House of Lords. They are all endlessly launched and relaunched, but nothing ever happens. It is not so much a Government strategy as a relaunch distraction strategy, intended to give the Prime Minister something to talk about when he is in desperate straits.

The Prime Minister's latest brainchild—you could not make this one up—is a National Council for Democratic Renewal. That sounds like something out of North Korea, but let us be clear about what it is. It is not some outward-looking convention that is open to the public. It is not even cross-party. It is just a bunch of Ministers talking to themselves.

What these proposals fail to address is the central question that we believe should lie behind any programme for constitutional reform: how do we take power away from the political elite, and give it to the man and woman in the street? Let me give the Prime Minister some real ideas. It is not time to allow people the opportunity to present a proposition and have it voted on in a local referendum? Should we not introduce so-called citizens' initiatives? Is it not time to give local people the right to stop excessive taxation? Should we not give them the right to hold a referendum on massive council tax rises?

When we, as democratically elected politicians, promise a referendum, as we all did on the European constitution, should we not stick to our promise? Is it not things of that kind that really sap people's faith in politics? At the heart of any programme of constitutional reform should be proper taxpayer transparency. Is it not time to publish all public spending, national and local, online, so that each taxpayer can see precisely how his or her hard-earned money is being spent?

If the test of effective constitutional reform is pushing power downwards, is it not the case that nothing fails more than proportional representation? Let me reaffirm our belief that it is a recipe for weak coalition Governments. Rather than voters choosing their Governments on the basis of manifestos, does it not all too often mean party managers choosing Governments on the basis of backroom deals? Our view is clear: we should not take away from the British people the right to get rid of weak, tired and discredited Governments. The most powerful thing in politics is not actually the soapbox or the Dispatch Box but the ballot box, particularly when it leads to the removal van. I have to ask the Prime Minister this: will not people conclude that he has started talking about proportional representation only because he fears he will lose under the existing rules?

If we want an electoral system that is fairer, should we not consider ensuring that each constituency is of equal worth? At present some constituencies have twice as many voters as others, which puts a premium on some votes. Is it not time to ask the Boundary Commission to redraw boundaries to make them all the same size? At the same time, should we not be reducing the size of the House of Commons?

[Mr. David Cameron]

Is it not the case that it is not the alternative vote that people want now, but the chance to vote for an alternative Government? Are these proposals not a pretty sorry attempt to distract attention away from a Prime Minister who has lost his authority, a Cabinet full of second preferences, and a Labour Government who have led this country to the brink of bankruptcy?

The Prime Minister: All MPs sitting in this Chamber must know what their constituents are telling them, but I do not think the Leader of the Opposition's statement reflects what they are saying to him. Nearly 70 per cent. of people did not vote in the elections of last week, and 40 per cent. voted for parties other than those represented here, and we have to accept that people want us first to clean up our politics quickly. I would have thought he would make more mention of that in his response to the statement.

We want all-party support for the new code of conduct and the parliamentary standards commissioner, and also for the way we deal with issues of exclusion from the House of Commons, which is something that has not been faced up to before. The precondition of any debate about the future of our democracy must be our determination to recognise, with humility, that this House has got to clean up its affairs as a matter of urgency, and every Member of Parliament shares a responsibility for doing that. Before we get into the different issues that divide our party—*[Interruption.]* Before we get into the different issues that divide the parties, I think the Conservative party—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister must be allowed to answer properly. *[Interruption.]* Order; this is very unfair indeed.

The Prime Minister: It is our responsibility to recognise that the problems of expenses are in every party in the House of Commons, and we must all accept the responsibility for sorting them out.

The Leader of the Opposition is quite wrong about the Constitutional Renewal Bill. It has been discussed by Committees of both Houses, and it was published in draft form some time ago. We have been debating it so we can get it absolutely right. It will come before the House of Commons for its Second Reading very soon, but before that we have to deal with the expenses crisis. The Constitutional Reform Bill removes the royal prerogative in key areas: the ability to declare peace and war is no longer a matter just for the Prime Minister or the Executive; it is a matter for the House of Commons, as are the declaration of treaties, the selection of people and pre-appointment hearings. There are a range of areas where the Executive have surrendered power to the House of Commons, and will continue to do so.

The time is also right for Parliament to make its affairs more accountable to the public. I think I am the first Prime Minister to propose a review to ensure that Select Committees can work in a new way, and I hope everybody will take up the opportunity to discuss that. I am also proposing that we look at means by which the public petitions that now come to No. 10 could come to Parliament in such a way that they could be debated.

As for the devolution of power, let us be clear that we devolved power to Scotland and Wales against the views of the Conservative party, and we also put forward constitutional proposals, including on freedom of information, which are now being seen to be changing our political system as a result of transparency. We want to expand that. The Sir Tim Berners-Lee proposal is to open up information more widely, and if we do that the Leader of the Opposition's proposal about information about money can be put on the internet. There are, therefore, a range of proposals.

On electoral reform, I think it is fair to say that before the Leader of the Opposition asked me questions at Prime Minister's Question Time, he had sight of the statement that I was to make to the House of Commons—

Mr. Cameron: For five minutes.

The Prime Minister: He had sight of the statement I was to make to the House of Commons, and it was therefore clear to him what I was proposing and what I was not proposing, and it is clear from what I have said that the debate is to be one in which we take into account the relationship between the constituency and the Member of Parliament; that is something we want to do. We are not going to turn our back on any discussion of reform; I suspect that only the Conservative party—not the Liberal party, nor other parties—want to do that now.

The Leader of the Opposition must also wake up to the fact that many systems of representation are already used in the United Kingdom. He did not reply to our proposals on the House of Lords. I take it that he still favours 80 or 100 per cent. elected representation in the Lords, and that he favours the proposals we are going to put forward to reform the House of Lords. The House of Lords has also got to face up to its responsibilities in that its discipline procedures and procedures for dealing with its finances are not good enough, and that is very much part of the measures we are putting forward.

These proposals are an essential element of restoring trust in politics and I hope they will gain all-party support.

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. Of course everyone agrees that the political crisis requires big changes in the way we do things, so I welcome this deathbed conversion to political reform from the man who has blocked change at almost every opportunity for the last 12 years. Everyone knows that the Labour party will lose the next general election, so any reforms must be in place before the election if they are to mean anything at all. Anything else would be a betrayal of the British people, who are angry and demanding that we change for good the rotten way we do politics. Does the Prime Minister not see that this is no time for more committees, more reviews and more consultation? We have been debating these issues for decades; is it not now time to get things done?

I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to moving towards an elected House of Lords, but will he give us a date by which this reform will be complete? We have already voted on it in this place; there should be no more delay. I also strongly welcome the move towards a Parliamentary Standards Authority and an

MPs' code of conduct. These changes should be implemented immediately with no more delay, so will the Prime Minister ask this House to forgo its summer recess so that we can push through all the necessary changes to clean up politics, and will he make sure that his immediate proposals include the right for people to sack their MP if it has been shown that they have done something seriously wrong?

I am dismayed that the Prime Minister is completely silent on the issue of party funding. How on earth can he possibly justify that? We cannot allow our politics to go the way of America's, where elections have become a contest of advertising budgets, not ideas. Why delay when he could just implement the Hayden Phillips recommendations in the party funding Bill that is already being debated in another place? The way forward has been agreed; why does he refuse to act?

On electoral reform, I welcome any movement away from our discredited system: a system that gives the Prime Minister's Government untrammelled power when only one in five people voted for them; a system that gives MPs safe seats for life. *[Interruption.]* That's why they like it. As Robin Cook recognised, and as the Prime Minister's new Home Secretary realises— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. You must be quiet Mr. Kawczynski; that is something you have got to do. *[Interruption.]* I know it is difficult for you, but try to be quiet.

Mr. Clegg: As Robin Cook recognised, and as the Prime Minister's new Home Secretary realises, this cannot go on. So why is the Prime Minister seeking to restart a general debate on electoral reform? We have had the debate: we had Roy Jenkins's report and the independent Power inquiry. We cannot afford to wait for a cross-party consensus because the Conservatives will never want to change this cosy Westminster stitch-up. We do not need to wait for the Cabinet to make up its mind; it is not up to it to decide how our democracy works. People should now be given a say, so will the Prime Minister now call a referendum this autumn to give people a choice—a choice between the bankrupt system we have now and serious proposals for reform which finally put the people in charge, not politicians? The Prime Minister has nothing to lose. This is no time for his trademark timidity. Just get on with it. Will he now cancel the recess, pass the legislation we need, and give people the say we deserve?

The Prime Minister: First, let me say where we agree. We agree—I am glad the right hon. Gentleman has said this explicitly—that we will all support the new Parliamentary Standards Authority; we will move from self-regulation to statutory regulation. We can therefore do that very quickly; it can be enacted very quickly to start almost immediately. We will all agree to the code of conduct, which means that the conditions under which MPs may be excluded from the House of Commons will be set down for them. We will modernise the means by which we deal with those issues where exclusion or recall is a possibility; I think there should be a debate on that over the next few weeks. We have got to make sure first of all that the country sees us dealing with the changes that are necessary, and I think that the mood of the House today still does not sufficiently recognise the gravity of the problems we face with our constituents and that we have got to deal with as a matter of immediacy.

As for the summer adjournment, I hope we can make progress, but I must ask the leader of the Liberal Democrats not to perpetuate the myth that for 12 or 14 weeks during the summer and autumn MPs do absolutely nothing. MPs are in their constituencies, and working there, and let us not perpetuate a myth that is not the correct story. Most MPs I know are working very hard indeed in their constituencies. That deserves to be said so that people understand that that is the case.

On the other issues, we agree about the reforms within Parliament, and there will be a chance for a group of people to look at those under the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee. On House of Lords reform, we agree about what needs to be done. The reason that reform of the Lords has been blocked is not the House of Commons, but the House of Lords itself.

As far as party funding is concerned, we have been looking, on an all-party basis, at how we can improve and reform party funding, and it is very much on the agenda. On electoral reform, I gave my statement to the leaders of the other parties before questions, and it made my position clear. I am sorry that some people misinterpreted that position during Prime Minister's questions, but my position is the clear position that I put to the House when I read out my statement. Other Members did not have a copy, but the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Liberal Democrats had it before questions.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has made an important announcement today that may even turn out to be historic. Will he consider adding one item to the list? It is an item on which I was elected in our manifesto in 1992, and I introduced a Bill on it eight years ago. It is an item that most people in the House now seem to have signed up to, and it is the proposition that we should have fixed-term Parliaments. May I ask him to signal his commitment to fixed-term Parliaments by announcing now the date of the next general election? May I suggest that 6 May 2010 would be an excellent date?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend, whom we are asking to undertake new responsibilities in this review, has strong views on these issues, including fixed-term Parliaments, which would be part of the discussions on a written constitution. He will understand why I am making no specific announcements today, and I do not propose to do so. It is more important to get on with the work that we have set out, both in cleaning up the politics of this country and in making the reforms that he, to his credit, has been proposing for years in this House.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): There is much in what the Prime Minister has said that I welcome, but his suggestions for a statutory code of conduct for Members of Parliament, enforceable in the courts, have enormous implications for all of us, our relationship with and accountability to our constituents, as well as the role of the House as the supreme court of Parliament. May I ask that this particular section of his proposals is not rushed through the House?

The Prime Minister: As the distinguished Chairman of the Committee that deals with the conduct of MPs, the right hon. Gentleman will be consulted on this issue, but there are many other legislatures that have a statutory code of conduct. Once in a generation a crisis builds up—it has happened in Australia, Canada, the United States and Germany—and people who should probably have taken action earlier to deal with it had to take action to reassure the public that everything possible was being done. A code of conduct is a necessary means by which the public will know that the behaviour of MPs will be regulated. That can be set down in many ways, but we cannot evade our responsibility to do it. We can discuss how it can be done and, at the same time, we will have to modernise how we deal with issues of suspension and exclusion from this House. As I understand it, only three people have been excluded from this House in a century and, given all the scandals in that time, that might sound strange to people. A person can be imprisoned for a year or in detention for six months, but still not be expelled from the House of Commons. We have to consider how our 19th century procedures line up with the common sense of the public in the 21st century. We will have discussions about this, but a statutory code of conduct is something that most of the country now wants to see.

Sir Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is appropriate for the Prime Minister to remind the House that during June we will publish the redacted receipts for expenses for the past four years, and we will also have the Kelly committee's recommendations. It is also appropriate—and I speak as a member of the House of Commons Commission—that the House authorities work with my right hon. Friend and the Government on procedural reforms. Is it also not appropriate that, by the end of the present Session of Parliament, we will have a new statutory code of conduct so that we can all go back to our constituents and tell them, "We have understood you."?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work on the Commission. He does a very good job and he should be applauded for the time that he gives to discharging his responsibilities. He is right: there is no way that the public will accept that this House has dealt with the problems that have been revealed unless we can pass that legislation as quickly as possible, and unless the review of the expenses of the last four years is confirmed by an independent auditor who has assessed the regularity of Members' expenses. We should have the humility to recognise that that has to be done as a matter of urgency. The sooner that the audit can be done—and the publication of the full expenses can be made, as ordered by the courts—the better.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Does the Prime Minister accept that it is not the Government's job to decide how the House of Commons should use its time in examining Government legislation? Will his reforms allow a body in which Back Benchers play a stronger role to be at the centre of the House's decision-making on its timetable?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly what the group convened by the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee will want to look at. The Government need to be able to get their business through, but there is also non-government time, and that can be discussed in more detail by a group of people who are experienced and have views on this issue. It will make recommendations to see what can be done. That is one way in which we can make progress on the government of this House.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): Since my right hon. Friend became Prime Minister, he has spoken of a new settlement with the British people. I welcome his commitment to a written constitution. He will accept that this process will take a long time, but there is no excuse for not starting it. Does he agree that it is essential that as we write this new constitution, it is not just law-makers, parliamentarians and the good and the great, but members of the public, who are directly involved in writing what will be the most important document in our constitution?

The Prime Minister: We have at the moment a consultation on a Bill of rights and responsibilities. My right hon. Friend is right—as I said in my statement, any written constitution would have to involve the widest possible consultation with the people. Let us be clear where our constitution is at the moment. It is not unwritten, in the sense that there are no written documents and no pieces of legislation. We have devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which in a sense creates a written constitution for those parts of the United Kingdom. There is the European Union legislation, which in a sense creates the conditions in which we operate as members of the EU. The Human Rights Act, the Freedom of Information Act and other Acts guarantee equality, including the Equality Bill before us at the moment. There is no shortage of legislation that defines some of our rights and some of the responsibilities of institutions. It is a fact that we have not brought those elements together coherently and cohesively, nor have we set down a statement of objectives and aims as other constitutions do, and that is the subject for our debate. We should recognise that the circumstances in which the debate about a written constitution should take place are completely different from where we were 20 years ago, when there was no devolution, when we did not have the same relationship with Europe and when we did not have human rights or freedom of information legislation. Things have changed fundamentally in the last 20 years.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): The Prime Minister has said many things in his statement that are entirely acceptable to my party and its sister party, and to others. He referred in passing to the imbalance between the power of the Executive and of Parliament. That is very detrimental to this Parliament. May I suggest that the daily abuse of guillotines is a farce? Bills come back on Report and 80, or even 100, amendments are passed on the nod without discussion. That is undemocratic and wrong, and it has to stop.

The Prime Minister: We have always got to get the balance right between a manifesto commitment that has been made by a party that is in government and the legislation that is necessary to get it through. If we are truly accountable to the people, a manifesto commitment that involves legislation is something that we have a responsibility to enact. Of course, time permitting, there

must be the maximum—*[Interruption.]* Someone says it is a feeble excuse when I say that people should implement their manifestos. I think that we will remember that when Opposition Members talk about manifestos in the future. The governing party makes a commitment to implementing its manifesto and, at the same time, there is the commitment that we want to give for the maximum possible consultation, but that depends on the time available in the House of Commons.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle) (Lab): Why on earth do we allow tax exiles to bankroll political parties? My friend talked a lot of sense about the Constitutional Renewal Bill, but on Monday the Lords will be discussing the Political Parties and Elections Bill on Report. Will he take that opportunity on Monday to close the Ashcroft loophole?

The Prime Minister: There are questions that have to be answered by Members of this House but also by Members of the other House.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington and Chelsea) (Con): May I, in the kindest possible way, suggest that today's statement is a rag-bag of ill-considered proposals brought forward in the last 11 months of this Parliament by an exhausted Prime Minister. That is no more apparent than in regard to his proposals for a written constitution. He knows that although much of our existing law is written, one thing that has made our democracy evolve in such a vibrant and straightforward fashion has been the conventions that have enabled change to be made without the rigidities associated with a written constitution. May I ask the Prime Minister whether he agrees that it would be premature for his Government to commit themselves to a written constitution until some proper deliberation has taken place—not just on what a written constitution might say, but on whether it is desirable in the first place?

The Prime Minister: The problems of this House of Commons and the workings of our political system being ad hoc and evolutionary have been revealed in the expenses scandal in the House of Commons. It is absolutely clear that a gentlemen's club, operating with its own rules and its own powers of discipline, has proven unsatisfactory and inadequate to meet the needs of the times. I believe that there are other areas in our constitution whereby our inability to be straight about what we are trying to do and to put that down in legislation means that we sometimes fail the public. I said that there is a debate to be had about a written constitution, and I know that the right hon. and learned Gentleman took my words carefully. There is a debate to be had on it. It is a major decision for our country, and he is clearly against it. Given that so much of our constitution is now written for the different parts of the United Kingdom, for different areas of policy and for the relationship between individuals and the state, it is worth considering putting that into one written constitution.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the authority and power of Parliament have been diminishing for decades under successive Governments and that in fact—programme motions have been mentioned in this context—we have reached a situation where, far from the Government being accountable to the House of Commons, the House of Commons is now accountable to the Government? The programme is determined outside the legislature, and, if we are to look at the renewal of the constitution, perhaps we should be even more sweeping. Perhaps we should even consider—I did not believe in this at one time—a separation of powers between Parliament and the Executive.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is proposing the American constitution for Britain. He knows the deadlock that often happens with the American constitution when Congress, the Senate and the President cannot agree on what needs to be done. If he looks back to what has happened over the past few months, he will see that we were able to persuade Parliament to put our banking reforms through and were able to finance our banks so that we could rescue them, whereas it took the Americans weeks and months to get those provisions through their legislature as a result of the issues that arise from the separation of powers. However, that is a debate for the future.

On the subject of the future of Parliament's role in dealing with legislation and issues, I remember the debate that John P. Mackintosh, who was a Member of this House in the 1960s, started about the role of Select Committees and how they could play a big role in the management of this House. There are two reasons that Select Committees have not had the effect that I know that my hon. Friend would want them to have. First, the reforms that we are talking about, which could have been made, have not been made. Secondly, Members have not seen them as important enough in themselves for them to put forward proposals to the House following the reports of Select Committees that would then lead to legislation. We need to have this discussion in the talks led by the Member who has great expertise in this matter to see what can be done. I am open to these discussions, as most Members are, but we must recognise the background. We have been trying to reform the Select Committee system and to make it more relevant for 40 years.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) (LD): I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to reforming the Select Committee system, but would it not make sense to give Select Committees real powers, such as, for example, providing that whenever a new Secretary of State is appointed to the Cabinet he or she must be subject to confirmation by the appropriate departmental Select Committee? Would that not be particularly appropriate when the Prime Minister is appointing Secretaries of State from the House of Lords and when he is considering the major constitutional step of appointing a new First Secretary of State?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a point about pre-confirmation hearings, and I think that I am right in saying that as a result of the announcements that we made two years ago, 62 positions are now subject to Select Committee hearings, which work very well. As far as Ministers are concerned, Ministers are responsible to this House. At the moment, if people want to bring forward motions on the suitability or unsuitability of Ministers, they can do so. Obviously, these matters can be discussed by the committee that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) is looking at.

Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): One democratic reform that I feel that the British public would like to see is a referendum on the principle of whether we remain in the European Union. No one under the age of 50 has had a chance to vote on the question of Europe and I think that, as a matter of course, we should have a referendum once every 15 to 20 years.

The Prime Minister: This issue was not put to the people by the Conservative Government who put us into the European Union. It was not put to the people when we went into the European Common Market, but it was put by a Labour Government in 1975. The conclusion was pretty clear—two thirds of the people wanted to be part of the Union. I do not think that that opinion has fundamentally changed.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Many in the House, on both sides, agree that it is now time for radical change to the way in which this place does its business. In the discussions that I have had, many Back Benchers have agreed that one of the biggest problems is that the Executive have become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Is not the point today that the Prime Minister has come forward with a statement in which the Executive tell the rest of us what we shall now reform? Should not the rest of us be telling the Executive what they should or should not do?

The Prime Minister: First, I am talking about powers that the Executive are surrendering to Parliament or powers that Parliament should have. I put forward proposals two years ago for a whole range of areas, such as pre-confirmation hearings, where the Executive should surrender some of their powers to Parliament. If the right hon. Gentleman is going to perpetuate the myth that somehow the problems of the past few weeks are not the problems of Parliament and are not problems that people consider to have been caused by mistakes made by Members of Parliament and this House, I do not think that he will get an echo in the country for what he is saying.

This House has to face up to the fact that it let the country down. We have to make the changes that are necessary. Many MPs who work hard, who do their duty and who have made no mistakes are being penalised because of the mistakes made by others, but we have a collective duty to clean up this House in the interests of democracy and everybody who saw last week the votes that were given to parties that are not represented in this House knows what our duty is. To say that the problem is not Parliament and that Parliament does not have to deal with its problems is, in my view, a mistake and a misreading of the situation. I hope that, on reflection, the right hon. Gentleman, who usually brings his wisdom on these matters to the House, will reconsider his view.

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West and Royton) (Lab): Although I warmly applaud the broad thrust of these proposals, does my right hon. Friend accept that the House's power to hold the Executive effectively to account is an essential part of any parliamentary democratic reform? If so, does he accept that this House should have the right to elect its own business committee and to share control of the agenda with Government, the right to elect both Chairs and members of Select Committees by secret ballot and the right to set up, where appropriate, its own parliamentary commissions of inquiry?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend, with whom I have talked about these matters, has taken a huge interest in this issue. He has been very vigorous in pursuing the case for reform over many years. I think that I have read work that he did 30 years ago, as well as 20 years and 10 years ago, so he is absolutely right to raise these questions. These are the very issues that can be examined by the group that is being set up. The role of Select Committees, the election of their membership, the business management of the House, how non-Government business should be dealt with, the role of public petitions and what we do about them—these are all issues that I feel that the public have the right to know that Parliament is investigating, as they all affect our accountability to the general public.

Mr. William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does the Prime Minister recall that he was recently in Normandy? People fought and died in the last war because they wanted to maintain a free democratic system in this country, based on a direct link between Member of Parliament, Government and constituents. They died for a democratic vote. Does he also accept that they did not die for judicial supremacy over and above the parliamentary supremacy that they fought for, regardless of whether decisions are made in our courts or in European courts?

The Prime Minister: I was able and had the honour to pay tribute to those who died during the D-day landings and their aftermath, as we moved from France to the fall of Berlin, the end of the Third Reich and the freedom of Europe. Those men and women who died in the service of their country deserve the gratitude of everyone in this House, and they will never be forgotten. I wanted to represent the British people, as did the Prince of Wales, and say that the result of the sacrifices that were made is that a Europe that was once divided is today free of conflict. People who once thought that wars would happen between their countries now know that there is peace and unity in Europe. I agree also that people fought for freedom, and freedom means that we have a British constitution that we can be proud of.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South) (Lab): May I put it to my right hon. Friend that, if we wish to enhance the standing of Parliament in the eyes of our constituents, there is one simple measure that we can take immediately and that requires no legislation—that is, to resume sittings in September? That is something that we voted for several years ago, but then reneged on. How can it be right in a democracy for Parliament to give the Executive an 80-day holiday from scrutiny? How can we expect to be taken seriously in the 21st century when we are still awarding ourselves Gladstonian-length recesses?

The Prime Minister: The tabling and answering of questions is of course possible in September, but I remind my hon. Friend that it was the House that voted not to have the September sitting, not the Government.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): The Prime Minister will know that I have asked him on two occasions—and the Leader of the House on nine—about what he can do to end the scandal and embarrassment caused by having huge chunks of Government legislation and Government amendments going through the House at Report stage without adequate scrutiny. Of course the Government must get their business through, if the House supports it, but does he accept that, if the scandal that I have described is not ended, the process that he has set out will have been a failure? This House must make sure that everything that it needs to debate and divide on is reached at Report stage. Unless that happens, we will not be able to take seriously what I hope is his serious commitment to moving from being a reform conservative to being a reform radical.

The Prime Minister: The House, of course, has developed pre-legislative scrutiny that allows some of the problems that have arisen in the past to be dealt with. However, the specific issue of amendments tabled during the course of a Bill is something that can be looked at in the review.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that the public will welcome very much the measures being taken to speed up the process of sorting out the terrible expenses scandal, but is there not something missing from the statement? It does not deal with the fact that, although we are trying to make the Executive more accountable to Parliament, roughly 75 per cent. of our laws are still made in Europe, where we have no real democratic involvement. Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Geraldine Smith), is it not time for us to have a serious discussion of our position in the EU? Should we not look again at having a referendum on the EU constitution?

The Prime Minister: By the red lines that we drew for the Lisbon treaty, we have done everything in our power to protect the position of British citizens in areas where we want this Parliament and this country to make their own decisions. However, while we are thinking about Europe, I must remind my hon. Friend that 3 million jobs depend on our membership of the EU, that 700,000 British companies trade with the EU, and that 60 per cent. of our exports go to the EU. We have a purposeful relationship with the EU that is in the interests of our economy, environment and security, and the idea that we should not have that relationship at this point in the 21st century seems to me to be wrong.

Mr. Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister a very pertinent question about the devolution dividend that would be gained from bringing parity to the size of constituencies. The Prime Minister failed to address that, but is not reducing the number of Members of Parliament something that we could do almost immediately?

The Prime Minister: There are probably 3 million people who are not on, or who are not counted on, the electoral register. That means that our constituencies do not reflect the total number of people available or eligible to vote. I think that the first thing that we should do is get the register in a position where everybody is on it. After that, we might want to discuss the fact that the number of seats in this House is far lower than the number of seats in the House of Lords. We might start by reducing the size of the House of Lords.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I welcome the wide-ranging statement that my right hon. Friend has made today? I should like to say a word or two about electoral systems. Does he agree that the statement addresses unfinished business from our 1997 manifesto? We have different options if we want to ensure effective Government, voter choice and a link between MP and constituency, and if we want to ensure that votes cast broadly result in a Parliament that reflects the balance of support for parties. The essential thing is that those choices are not for politicians, whether in government or opposition: instead, they should be made by the British people themselves. Does he agree that they should have the right to make those choices?

The Prime Minister: That is what is stated in our manifesto.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): In his statement, the Prime Minister referred to the messages sent by the electorate at the recent elections. However, the messages that he referred to were not the ones that I heard. The first message that people expressed—more in anger than in sorrow, on many occasions, and sometimes the other way around—was that the Prime Minister must go. The second message was that the people wanted to pass judgment on Members of this House, and to do so now and in an election.

The third message was that we should have the promised referendum on the European constitution and the Lisbon treaty. The Prime Minister has ruled out the first two requests but, given his statement today about involving people, why can he not grant the third?

The Prime Minister: I have to say that any MP coming back from these elections knows that many people in the country were giving their verdict, not just on the Government but on how we had conducted ourselves over our expenses. If we ignore that, and do not take the action that is essential—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is proposing an election and no action on expenses, whereas I am proposing action on expenses now. I am proposing that we clean up the system now. If I may say so, it is the Government who are proposing the Parliamentary Standards Authority and the code of conduct. I am glad that the Opposition parties and I can agree on that, and we should get those proposals through, but I think that there is an unwillingness on the part of the Conservatives to admit the seriousness with which the public have taken the expenses crisis. I hope that they can face up to that.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Prime Minister's reference to Select Committees, but would he support making available to them a vastly increased amount of resources so that they can be even more effective in challenging the Executive? Does he agree that they should be able to call for any papers that they require?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend is Chairman of the Transport Committee and that she does a very great job. It is hardly surprising that she is asking for greater resources, but these are matters for decision by the House, not the Government.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Is the Prime Minister aware that what really matters to our constituents at the moment and what fuels their anger over parliamentary allowances is the state of the economy and their fear for their jobs and livelihoods? They see the attempt to divert the agenda to consideration of a rag-bag of constitutional reforms as simply a form of displacement activity by the Prime Minister. Is he aware of the definition of "displacement activity"? It is defined as follows:

"A pattern of behaviour believed to be a means"—

by which animals relieve—

"tension resulting from two contradicting instincts."

The definition continues by stating that this activity

"often involves actions such as scratching, excessive grooming or chasing one's own tail."

Does the Prime Minister agree that we should focus on the economy? If he wants a constitutional reform, he should support my ten-minute Bill, which will deal with a problem raised by the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) about Bills leaving this House unconsidered and will suspend the right of the Government to guillotine debate so long as they are forcing this House to sit fewer days than it used to in the past.

The Prime Minister: I cannot really understand the statements that are now coming from Conservative Back Benchers. We must face up to the expenses issue; the right hon. Gentleman seems to suggest that we do not need to face up to that issue, but we do. That is not displacement activity; it is essential activity in order to restore the reputation of politics. I happen to agree with him about the economy, but the action that we have taken is to move the economy as quickly as possible through the downturn. The Leader of the Opposition fails to ask any questions about the economy at any time we meet.

Martin Salter (Reading, West) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement on constitutional renewal and urge him to ignore some of the protestations of Conservative Members. Can we end, once and for all, the anachronism of constitutional convention, which is all too often used as shorthand for doing nothing or for resisting necessary change? Secondly, can he go a little further and end the scandal of MPs moonlighting to line their own pockets? We are paid a full-time salary for a full-time job and we should honour that.

The Prime Minister: I believe that on 1 July all second incomes will have to be published, in the greatest of detail demanded by the House, by all Members who have second jobs and second incomes. I am glad that the House agreed, and that everybody was satisfied, that that was the right thing to do. The public will then be able to judge for themselves what is happening in that area. As for convention, there are some conventions, but the whole debate about a written constitution is about whether things that are seen as conventional should be made into statutes so that people are absolutely clear about their rights and responsibilities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

BILL PRESENTED

Fuel Poverty (No.2) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr. Alan Whitehead, supported by Mr. Paul Truswell, Ms Karen Buck, Mr. Martin Caton, Colin Challen and Mr. David Drew, presented a Bill to make further provision about fuel poverty; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 June, and to be printed (Bill 110).

Points of Order

1.32 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. As chairman of the all-party group on first past the post, whose largest contingent is Scottish Labour MPs who have seen the chaos that proportional representation has brought to Scottish elections, may I say how frustrated I am that the Prime Minister did not consult my group and is bypassing this very important body of thought in the House of Commons?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is continuing with the statement and getting involved in a debate, and it is really not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. On previous occasions when a lot of people have been seeking to catch your eye on a statement, you have indicated that in consideration of the forthcoming legislation you would be minded to give preference to those people who have not been successful in catching your eye. Bearing in mind the importance of the statement that we have just heard and the fact that it affects all of us and our constituencies, will you advise the Government that they should allow consideration of this legislation to proceed without any guillotine or timetable? Will you also ensure that all Back Benchers who wish to participate in the debate can do so?

Mr. Speaker: That might be something that the hon. Gentleman could put to the new Speaker.

Gangmasters Licensing Act 2004 (Amendment) Bill

Motion for leave to introduce a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.34 pm

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to apply the provisions of the Gangmasters Licensing Act 2004 to the construction industry; and for connected purposes.

I shall always be proud that this Government gave their support to the passing and implementation of my private Member's Bill targeting illegal gangmasters. That legislation sought to flush out those who were exploiting both migrant and indigenous workers, and despite the powerful arguments put forward at the time, the Bill covered only agricultural and related industries. I, along with the trade unions and legal gangmasters—we were supported by many of my colleagues who are here to support this Bill, and I remain extremely appreciative of their assistance—argued at the time that should that Bill prove effective, the unscrupulous gangmasters would move into other industries. The evidence suggests that that is exactly what has happened. The construction trade was the industry that we used as an example then, because of its diverse and mobile nature, and it is where we find illegal gangmasters working now. Those of us who worked in the construction and related industries are well aware of the dangerous environment that those on the job face, and I will return to that later.

Migrant workers who come to this country for legitimate work are often lured into the twilight world of illegal gangmasters, so I caution those who blame the workers and ask them to focus instead on the real villains: the illegal gangmasters. Anecdotal evidence from those who have suffered under those unscrupulous people suggests that they are experiencing the same despairing conditions as did those who were exposed in the agriculture industry—none more so than the Chinese workers who perished on the shores of Morecambe bay.

Despite the current financial situation, most commentators agree that we can build our way out of this downturn with major construction projects, such as the Olympic village, and related issues. What we do not need is a Morecambe bay-type tragedy in the construction of the Olympics. Health and safety matters are extremely important to those in the building trade and wider related industries, and people must have the fundamental right of returning home safely after their work.

Since 2007, there have been 120 fatal accidents in the construction industry. Again, there is evidence that illegal gangmasters supply unskilled labour to major construction companies and their subcontractors to carry out skilled and dangerous work without taking into consideration the safety consequences for the general public, others on the site and themselves. These gangmasters also undermine the legitimate employers who invest in training, and pay their taxes and national insurance contributions. That is particularly true of—and financially damaging to—small businesses struggling to survive and compete.

On the financial implications, there is increasingly tangible evidence that gangmasters, who are required to register, should also be tax-compliant and follow the

[Jim Sheridan]

VAT registration rules. In 2007 alone, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority identified more than £2 million in extra VAT payments for the Exchequer—the figure takes no account of additional income tax and the national insurance contributions now being paid as a result of the GLA's work. So the Government have a vested interest in giving serious consideration to this issue, and I sincerely hope that they do so.

Members of the House should also be aware of the serious matter of community unrest; where genuine workers see others doing their work and not contributing to the community or wider society, social unrest and frustration is generated. That manifests itself, as has happened this week, in people turning to extremist parties such as the British National party, which are happy to exploit such situations. There is a political advantage in addressing this issue and demonstrating to the workers that we are on their side and on the side of good employers.

May I give the House just a flavour of some of the activities being undertaken by these gangmasters, by going through some case studies? A14 Vehicle Hire, which is based in Kettering, had its licence revoked with immediate effect after serious concerns were expressed over the safety of its workers. The GLA uncovered allegations of workers being housed in overcrowded and unsafe accommodation, and a number of houses were immediately closed by the local authority for breaches of gas and electrical safety regulations. Some 15 adults and three children were found in a four-bedroom house.

Timberland Homes Recruitment Ltd had its licence revoked with immediate effect on 6 May 2008.The company was based in Suffolk but sent workers to pick flowers in Cornwall and Scotland. GLA officers found serious abuses, including a threatening letter to workers stating that they were not free to leave before the end of the contract without paying £700, and that if they did not have the money, it would be recovered from the workers or their families in their home country. Some workers stated that they received £24 for a nine-hour day. No time-sheets were used, so pay could not be accurately recorded. The Vehicle and Operator Services Agency issued prohibition notices on six Timberland minibuses in Cornwall, but Timberland still transported workers to Scotland in the same vehicles. Timberland Homes Recruitment Ltd did not appeal against the GLA decision. It is no longer permitted to trade in the licensable sectors, but it is believed to be operating in the construction industry.

I shall give a second case study. Morantus Ltd, which traded as 247 Staff in Burton on Trent, supplied workers across the midlands to British Bakeries, Thorntons and Florette. A GLA investigation found that Robert Taylor, director of Morantus, forced migrant workers to live in run-down, cramped houses, and made them pay over the odds for that accommodation as a condition of finding them work. The officers found a room, measuring 2.8 m by 3.8 m, that housed three adults, two children and a baby; it had a double mattress, a single mattress and a child's seat. Money was withheld from workers, and they were forced to sign standing orders under the threat of not receiving work. Workers were not paid the national minimum wage, and they were bonded to the accommodation; if they wanted to keep their jobs, they had to use, and pay for, the accommodation provided. Morantus lost its appeal against the GLA decision, and is now believed to be trading in the construction industry.

I turn to the subject of independent research. An independent report published in March 2009 by the universities of Liverpool and Sheffield, commissioned by the GLA, shows that the tough enforcement approach of the GLA makes for effective regulation. The researchers found that

"licensing has been an appropriate tool to regulate labour providers...agency workers are now better placed because of government regulation; and...the GLA is an effective and efficient regulator."

That is why we would like the gangmaster licensing legislation to be extended to the construction industry.

In conclusion, the trade unions, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Federation of Master Builders are asking for help to get the industry through these difficult times. With a little bit of vision and support, we can bring about a change for the construction industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jim Sheridan, Mr. Michael Clapham, Alun Michael, Mrs. Ann Cryer, Mr. David Hamilton, Mr. Ian McCartney, John Robertson, Mr. Stephen Hepburn, Sandra Osborne, Mr. Jim Devine, Mr. Jim McGovern and Mr. David Anderson present the Bill.

Jim Sheridan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October and to be printed (Bill 109).

Geneva Conventions and United Nations Personnel (Protocols) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme) (No. 2)

1.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Chris Bryant): I beg to move,

That the Order of 1 April (Geneva Conventions and United Nations Personnel (Protocols) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs 3 and 4 shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 4.00 pm at this day's sitting.

The motion is fairly straightforward, but for the sake of clarity I might just explain one bit to the House. Paragraph 1 of the motion says that paragraphs 3 and 4 of the programme order of 1 April relating to the Bill shall be omitted. Hon. Members might not know what paragraphs 3 and 4 were; they might think that there is some dastardly plot afoot and that we are somehow seeking to undermine the House. The truth of the matter is that paragraph 3 was as follows:

"Proceedings in Committee and any proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption",

and paragraph 4 said:

"Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption."

If the programme motion is carried by the House, we should finish by 4 o'clock. That will protect the minority parties' Opposition half-day debate, which we will enjoy later this afternoon. Obviously, we wish to protect that. We therefore will not proceed with our discussions on the Bill until the moment of interruption. It is important that the two paragraphs from the original programme motion be struck down; otherwise, the House would be disagreeing with itself, and we all know that a

"house divided against itself shall not stand".

Without further ado, I commend the programme motion.

1.45 pm

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I welcome the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) to the Dispatch Box on his first outing as a Foreign Office Minister; it is good to see him in that post. I should like to place it on record that I have always appreciated the good humour and courtesy shown by the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) during her time at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I particularly appreciated the way in which she dealt with the Opposition parties on the earlier stages of the Bill.

I have to say that I am a bit disappointed that the Minister has to defend a programme motion on his first such outing. We have, after all, been hearing incessantly over the past 48 hours about how the Government have changed, how they will listen, how they wish to consult, and how they will now try to make Parliament stronger in its ability to hold the Executive to account, yet we are faced with a programme motion on which, as I understand it, there has not been prior consultation with the Opposition parties. As the Minister well knows, the Bill is not the subject of party political contention, but Members have sought to raise legitimate questions about it. However, it is not a measure on which there will be a major partisan battle. I would have thought that, as an emblem of the promised change of heart to which the Prime Minister has said that he is fervently committed, we could have had, in place of a programme motion, a consultation between the representatives of the different political parties. I would have thought that we could have agreed on a sensible way to handle the further stages of the Bill and proceeded on that basis.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that the Procedure Committee is undertaking a report on timetabling. I wonder whether he will join his party in the views that it expresses in its evidence to the report—I suspect that that evidence will not say that timetabling should come to an end—or whether he will provide his own evidence to say that there should be no timetabling. My view is that there should perhaps be areas where we do not need to timetable. It was necessary to do so today purely and simply because we want to ensure that we protect the half-day debate for the minority parties. It is important that we protect that.

Mr. Lidington: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me to try to second-guess my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alan Duncan) and my right hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), the shadow Chief Whip, which I shall not do. My view on timetabling and programming is that if it is to work and to be seen as the expression of the House's decision on the priority that should be accorded to different pieces of legislation and to different stages of any one piece of legislation, it is important that discussions about programming and timetabling take place well in advance between the representatives of the different political parties represented in the House. A timetable should not be presented by the Government of the day as a fait accompli that everyone else is expected to swallow without dispute.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that when I was shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, we dealt with quite a lot of legislation that contained controversial and contentious points, but which did not involve matters of great dispute between the Government and Opposition, although the issues were important and contentious within Northern Ireland. We were sometimes able to agree to let a debate take place without the imposition of arbitrary guillotines or knives, and to find a way for Parliament, and particularly Members representing Northern Ireland constituencies, to express their points of view and represent the interests of their constituents, and yet for that business to be handled within a sensible and timely framework of debate.

I am disappointed in the Government's attitude this afternoon. Unless the Minister can persuade me otherwise, I am minded to challenge the programme motion in the Division Lobby.

1.50 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Following our exchanges in the European Committee yesterday and in the Committee Corridor, I want to take the opportunity on the Floor of the House to welcome the

[Jo Swinson]

Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), to his job.

I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) regarding the Minister's predecessor, now the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), who built consultation into her approach to the job as Minister and was forthcoming with information on the Bill in its early stages. That is to be welcomed generally in Government, and most particularly on a Bill such as this, on which there is a certain degree of consensus and not much controversy. That cannot be said for many debates in the House at this time.

To my knowledge, it is true that there was no prior consultation about the programme motion. It was helpful that the Minister read out paragraphs 3 and 4 of the original order. When I looked at the motion, I suddenly thought, "Oh my goodness, what are the paragraphs that will be omitted?" I found the relevant piece of paper from 1 April and realised that these were not horrendous omissions, but were designed merely to protect the later debate, which I am sure that, as the Minister said, we will all enjoy. The changes were well intentioned and sought to ensure that the time of Opposition parties was protected.

There is only one further comment that I would make. I am not sure whether this is in the Minister's gift, but perhaps he might be able to speak to his former colleagues in the Department of the Leader of the House, as it might have been helpful if the original paragraphs had been printed on the Order Paper. That would have made it simpler for hon. Members to see at a glance that there was no sinister attempt to stop debate on the Bill, and that the changes made sense. Although I accept the issues raised by the hon. Member for Aylesbury about lack of consultation on the programming, the motion makes sense and I am minded to support the Government.

1.52 pm

Chris Bryant: With the leave of the House, let me say that I am grateful to both the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) and the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) for reiterating the pleasant comments that they made yesterday in Committee. I wholly concur with them in everything they said about the now Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron); I know from the private office that I have inherited that she is held in very high esteem by many hon. Members across the House in respect of the way that she conducts her business and the acuity with which she has approached many issues on which there is a wide divergence of views. I think of her as a close personal friend as well, so it is a great honour to be able to follow in her—I about to say shoes, but I do not know that I can quite wear her shoes. *[Interruption.]* The Conservative Deputy Chief Whip (paid) is trying to entice me into high heels. *[Interruption.]* I am paid almost as much as he is. He knows that I reserve that for special occasions with him.

I know that the hon. Member for Aylesbury is a choral singer, and I hope he will be singing in tune with us this afternoon. He spoke about prior consultation. I am sure he is fully aware that there has been prior consultation about the amount of time allocated. One of the things that I discovered when I was Deputy Leader of the House was that sometimes the prior consultations that happen through the usual channels are completely disowned, as though they had never happened. Despite all those shaking heads, I am sure there was some kind of consultation. I want to make sure that—

Jo Swinson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: If the hon. Lady will allow me, I shall finish this point, lest I have to start being rude to her. I want to make sure that where we can proceed in unity in the House, we do so. There is no point in trying to score partisan points just for the sake of it, but I reserve my position on that for the hon. Lady.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I know that in his previous job, he was keen to mo[illegible] the House. Do not his comments about the usual cha[illegible] and about whether messages get through signal the need for a shake-up of the usual channels and more transparency in how all these things to do with programming and timing are decided?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady makes a decent point about the openness and transparency with which we do our business. That is a matter for the whole House, not just for the Government. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House and others want to take forward some of that agenda. I know also that Members of the hon. Lady's party and others want to pursue the question whether there should be a business committee, but that is not the business of the motion.

I want to raise two other points in response to the hon. Lady's comments. First, on whether the previous motion should appear on the Order Paper, I am more than happy to make sure that my successor as Deputy Leader of the House, who is also a close friend, knows of her comments. Such an arrangement would fit well with our efforts to make sure that all Ministers answer questions not just by referring to a previous answer, but by providing the information again. It is for the convenience of everybody in the House.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Minister is right to say that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) suggested from the Front Bench, this is not a partisan matter, but the hon. Gentleman will have noted that when we last debated the subject on the Floor of the House, there was a great deal of interest on the part of hon. Members. The matter was debated at some length and in some detail. It requires full exploration, even though it is not partisan. Is the general principle that when a measure is not partisan, it should not be explored fully?

Chris Bryant: Obviously, I have read *Hansard* for the previous debate in the House and the debates in the other House, and I note the comments that were made by many Members. I notice, too, that there seemed to be a growing interest in the debates. It grew as the debates progressed, and I note that that may be happening this afternoon as well. None the less, we said that we would

make sure that we had a half-day available for the second debate this afternoon, and there is a great deal of interest among some Members in that debate, so we wanted to make sure that it was protected.

The second point that I wanted to make was that when officials refer to a piece of legislation as uncontroversial—I have been told about 20 times in the past 24 hours that something is not controversial—my experience is that it often encourages people none the less to expatiate. That may happen later. It is important that we ensure that even on non-controversial legislation, where there is no partisan difference, there is a time lag between Second Reading, Committee and Report, so that Members can table amendments as a result of the debate.

As the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) knows, no amendments have been tabled for today, so I hope the views about non-controversiality that were expressed to me were correct. However, it is important to acknowledge that we have made sure that there is a gap between the two stages, and that the Bill, which is important though not controversial, as the hon. Gentleman said, gets proper scrutiny.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 332, Noes 157.

Division No. 145] **[1.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, Danny
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Baker, Norman
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barrett, John
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brake, Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brooke, Annette
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Butler, Ms Dawn
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Caton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Challen, Colin
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David
Creagh, Mary
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs. Claire
Davey, Mr. Edward
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fiello, Mr. Robert
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Don
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Goggins, Paul
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harris, Mr. Tom
Harvey, Nick
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Heath, Mr. David
Hemming, John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, rh Keith
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, David
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Hughes, Simon
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Kidney, Mr. David
Knight, rh Jim
Kramer, Susan
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Leech, Mr. John
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Malik, Mr. Shahid
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie

Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Pearson, Ian
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Pugh, Dr. John
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, Mr. Alan
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rogerson, Dan
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Rowen, Paul
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, Sir Robert
Snelgrove, Anne
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Spink, Bob
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Swinson, Jo
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Teather, Sarah
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Thurso, John
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Watts, Mr. Dave
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willott, Jenny
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Tami and Mr. John Heppell

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Amess, Mr. David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baldry, Tony
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Browning, Angela
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burt, Alistair
Campbell, Mr. Gregory
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.
Dorries, Nadine
Duddridge, James
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Field, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Gray, Mr. James
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hermon, Lady
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Holloboné, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Horam, Mr. John
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lidington, Mr. David
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Mason, John
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Price, Adam
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Randall, Mr. John
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rosindell, Andrew
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Spring, Mr. Richard
Stanley, rh Sir John
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Weir, Mr. Mike
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Hywel
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Brooks Newmark and Mr. John Baron

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That the Order of 1 April (Geneva Conventions and United Nations Personnel (Protocols) Bill [*Lords*] (Programme)) be varied as follows:

1. Paragraphs 3 and 4 shall be omitted.

2. Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 4.00 pm at this day's sitting.

Geneva Conventions and United Nations Personnel (Protocols) Bill [*Lords*]

Considered in Committee

[Sir Alan Haselhurst *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

Amendments of the Geneva Conventions Act 1957

Question proposed, That the Clause stand part of the Bill.

2.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Chris Bryant): As I am sure hon. Members will know, the first clause of the Bill amends the Geneva Conventions Act 1957, which itself incorporated the 1949 Geneva conventions; those conventions were built on the 1864 Geneva convention, which was linked to the creation of the Red Cross. On 12 August—the glorious 12th—it will be the 60th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva conventions. Oddly enough, that happens to be my uncle's birthday; even more oddly, he used to make "The Famous Grouse". That date will be a multiple anniversary this year.

The four conventions of 1949 were built on former versions. First and foremost, they were to protect the wounded or the sick and ensure that such defenceless combatants should be respected and cared for, whatever their nationality. The personnel attending them, the buildings in which they sheltered and the equipment used for their benefit were to be protected, and a red cross on a white background was to be the emblem of that immunity. Other elements of that first convention have been modified over the years—in relation, for instance, to medical personnel and chaplains. Originally, if such personnel fell into enemy hands, they had to be repatriated immediately. Now, however, the situation is rather different.

The second convention related to the protection of those in combat at sea. The third was for the protection of prisoners of war. For many centuries, this country has sought to make sure that there was a proper understanding of how prisoners of war should be protected. The French have sometimes tried to remind us about Agincourt, but for the past few hundred years we have been wholeheartedly committed to ensuring that prisoners of war are treated properly. Finally, the fourth convention was to protect civilians.

The distinctive emblem has been referred to and is being amended by the new optional protocol. It was defined in article 38 of one of the 1949 Geneva conventions:

> "As a compliment to Switzerland, the heraldic emblem of the red cross on a white ground, formed by reversing the Federal colours, is retained as the emblem and distinctive sign of the Medical Service of armed forces."

That gave protection to all those who were serving.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire) (Con): I am following the Minister's points with great interest. Does the symbol of Switzerland not also carry the connotation of neutrality and have a lot of history behind it, to do with the Hospitallers and so on? The sign is very distinctive and well recognised worldwide. It

[Mr. Oliver Heald]

is known, and the same is true of the red crescent. How can the new symbol be marketed so that people fighting wars in far-distant places will recognise it and give it the same authority? We are talking about signs that are so emblematic and well known. Is adding a third one a good idea?

Chris Bryant: There is already a third one in the conventions—the red lion and sun—so that Persia had an emblem that it could adopt. The hon. Gentleman is right that the signs are emblematic. I say that with a slight rise of the eyebrow, because what one flag or emblem symbolises to one set of people—perhaps even the majority of the world—will not necessarily be symbolised to everybody.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Hospitallers, and the reference to the crusades is not lost on some people, although anybody in the Red Cross would wholly deprecate the association. None the less, the truth is that in some cases it has been difficult for us to ensure that connotations of a religious war or crusade do not undermine the work that the Red Cross or Red Crescent are able to do.

Mr. Heald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. In broad terms, I am sympathetic to the Bill. I worry, however, that we will have symbol after symbol until almost every country, or every continent, has a symbol in addition to the ones that we have already. In the end, the famous nature of the red cross might be diminished.

Chris Bryant: The honest truth is that in the vast majority of cases, certainly as they affect the United Kingdom, people will retain either the red cross or the red crescent. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we should not be amplifying these symbols. As I said, we have had three emblems, including the red lion and sun, which modern Iran chooses not to use. In a sense, therefore, we are back down to two. There have been moves in some other countries towards being able to create other symbols; hon. Members may want to make reference to the situation in Israel. In wanting to be able to accommodate the whole world, we should not be seeking to create a different emblem for every part of it. We should be going through a proper process to ensure that the rules governing emblems are adhered to so that there are not wild divergences and they are properly respected.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham) (Con): The Minister touched on the star of David, which the Israelis want as their symbol. Does he anticipate that the advent of the red crystal will reduce pressure from Israel to use the star of David? Otherwise, there could be three, if not four symbols in the middle east.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman may know that the Israeli national society, the Magen David Adom, has used the red star of David, although only internally, which has meant that it has not been able to join the international Red Cross movement. Importantly, the introduction of the red crystal has enabled Israel to sign up to become a part of the Red Cross movement, so Israelis and Palestinians have been able to share in the movement. That is not the biggest step that we need to take in the middle east process, but it helps to move us forward.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): This is a very important issue; it is not only about emblems but about their significance. I fully share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) that the red cross is universally recognised. The Minister will understand that I approach the issue from a military perspective. The armed forces know and recognise the red cross; equally, it is generally the case that the red cross is not abused. I am worried that unless there is a rigorous regime to ensure that the red crystal is not abused, our armed forces, who are already feeling hamstrung by human rights legislation, could find that our enemies abuse the red crystal and our troops would therefore be at risk. What assurances can the Minister give Britain's armed forces in that respect?

Chris Bryant: I know of the interest that the hon. Gentleman has historically taken in the armed forces, which, as he knows, I share. He is absolutely right that we need to ensure that there is strong protection for the symbols that are already used, and equally so for the red crystal. Where it is used because it is thought to be the most appropriate means of protecting the medical forces, we need to ensure that it is fully understood. My experience during a brief visit to Basra with the armed forces parliamentary scheme showed me that the British armed forces are very well attuned to the business of winning hearts and minds, and part of that will be making the right decisions on the ground about which emblem to use. Equally, we have to ensure that as many countries as possible ratify and enter into this process, so that they understand, and can ensure that their armed forces understand, the significance of the emblems.

It is important to emphasise that the decision on the red crystal did not come out of thin air; it was a long, complicated process involving a lot of different countries that had found it difficult to decide between different emblems. For instance, in Eritrea the decision is not between a emblem that does not exist and one that does, but between the red cross and the red crescent, because those are the symbols of the two religious communities in the country, who have very strongly held religious views. In that circumstance, the red crystal forestalls the need for inventing lots of new emblems by deciding on one that can be used more generically.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): I agree with the Minister that there has to be international support in developing an understanding of the red crystal symbol. However, are there not practical concerns that it might be misinterpreted, particularly on a battlefield? A red crystal on an armband worn by an orderly will look like a lozenge or a diamond shape unless the arm is bent, when it could look like a red square.

Chris Bryant: The same could be true of a red cross, because if the arm is bent in the right way it ends up no longer being a cross, but a sword. I am afraid that those issues remain. In fact, as often as not the colour is the determinant. Professional brand managers say that people do not recognise a brand until they have seen it 16 times. After that, the effect will often be created by the precise Pantone shade that is used, the combination of red and white, and seeing it in a military context. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, as have all other hon. Members.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Is there any general move in order to try to remove ambiguity towards the crystal evolving into the main symbol and the other two going out of use?

Chris Bryant: No, there is not, and I do not think that that would be appropriate. There is no need to abandon the red cross or the red crescent, which are very well known and much respected symbols. However, there are circumstances in which a third or fourth emblem is necessary, or would be useful. There is no need, certainly in the short term, for us to move towards abandoning the red cross.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This is an important subject, as I said when we debated the programme motion. The universality of the cross and the crescent is their virtue. The problem with the Bill is that it proposes a multiplication of symbols, or emblems. I cannot think that that is compatible with universality, which has been at the heart of the success of the cross and the crescent.

Chris Bryant: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. It is interesting that he used the phrase, "The universality of the cross". To many conservative evangelical Christians, that phrase would have a capital U and a capital C, and it would have a very strong religious significance—although he obviously did not intend it in that sense. For many, the cross is what they live and die for. In that context—in which, in some parts of the world, religion can be one of the axes that is used to create division and wars—it is important that we are able to have an additional symbol. He refers to a proliferation of symbols, but that will not happen: there will not be additional symbols coming down the line in a couple of years' time. One more symbol is being added to the list, with one of the three existing symbols no longer being in use.

Mr. Hayes: The cross has been used as a symbol since prehistoric times. It can be traced to almost every culture, Christian and other, as a symbol that represents a variety of things, such as health, peace or fertility, depending on which culture one turns to. To identify the cross purely, or largely, with the Christian tradition is to misunderstand its history.

Chris Bryant: I am being tempted down theological lines, which is quite dangerous, so I should rather like to say, "Get thee behind me, Satan." I believe that the hon. Gentleman understands the point that there are situations in which forces that are trying to do good would be afforded better protection and better understanding among the local population if they did not use a symbol that could be misunderstood as having a largely religious undertone or overtone. That is what we are seeking to avoid.

2.30 pm

Mr. Heald: I am trespassing on the Minister's good will, but we have established that a symbol such as the cross or the crescent is historic and well known. Even in places where there is not a proper education system and there is not an easy opportunity to market a new symbol, people know about crosses and crescents. How will we be able to establish the new brand of the crystal in a war-torn place where perhaps only half the children go to school? In such places, where this really matters, will it be easy to establish the new symbol?

Chris Bryant: I do not believe that we need to establish it in every part of the world with immediate effect. The truth of the matter is that there are many parts of the world where the current symbols are perfectly adequate and perfectly well understood. Incidentally, the hon. Gentleman suggests that there might be parts of the world where brands cannot be marketed. I do not think that Coca-Cola believes that. It believes that there is no such part of the world. One of the great successes of Mr. Henri Dunant's original idea following the battle of Solferino was that something without words in it could cross linguistic barriers and be readily understandable around the world. That is what the Red Cross movement has achieved.

I wish to pay substantial tribute to the British Red Cross Society, which has been around since 1870—we were one of the earlier countries to adopt the red cross. It does great work, and I know that many people hold it in high esteem and would be saddened if it changed from the Red Cross Society to anything else. However, it wholeheartedly supports the Bill. Around the world, the Red Cross movement hopes that as many countries as possible will ratify the change. It has already meant that the Israeli and Palestinian societies have been able to join the movement, and it will give the movement a strong future for many decades, and I hope centuries.

Mr. Hayes: I have no desire to be unnecessarily disputatious, but the Minister mentions Henri Dunant and Solferino. I recommend to the House Dunant's book on Solferino. What he wanted was not only protection but, as the Minister will know, an international agreement to secure that protection. Implicit in that appeal was the recognition, through a symbol, of protection that was non-partisan and universally available. I am very concerned about the issue of universality, and I hope that the Minister might say another word about it before he sits down, after which I am sure we can make time for other contributions.

Chris Bryant: I suspect that however many words I say about the universality of the original symbol, I will not be able to appease the hon. Gentleman. The truth of the matter—I keep on saying "the truth of the matter", and I must stop doing so—is that when the original symbol was created it was not envisaged that there would be parts of the world where there might be disputation about whether it involved religious significance. Consequently, we have grown to have not just one symbol but three, and now we are moving towards having a fourth. I like to think, and those who dedicate their lives to the Red Cross movement believe, that that is fully consistent with what Mr. Dunant aspired to. Indeed, as a former deputy leader of the Labour party said, sometimes we need traditional values in a modern setting. That is precisely what we can advance now.

As I have said, three emblems are currently allowed—the cross, the crescent and the lion and sun, although the last is not much used now. There are some problems, including misunderstanding about religious symbols. For some, the cross is a highly religious and divisive symbol. For others it is a symbol of unity, and when

[Chris Bryant]

they see the red cross they do not see a religious symbol at all. Eritrea has been unable to choose which is the right symbol to use, and Israel likewise. I am delighted that bringing forward the red crystal has made it possible to enable both Israelis and Palestinians to take part in the movement.

Dr. Kim Howells (Pontypridd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his new position. It is a very important one, and I know that he will do an excellent job.

May I ask my hon. Friend to clear up some of the nuts and bolts of the matter? If three symbols will be accepted, that does not mean, does it, that nations will be able to pick and choose which of the three they will allow people to use to visit political prisoners, for example, and do all the things that the Red Cross does so brilliantly at the moment, often in very difficult circumstances? It will not somehow result in three different organisations that people will use for nefarious purposes, destroying the central goodness of what the Red Cross and the Red Crescent do.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and neighbour for his comments. He was a fine Minister in the Foreign Office, and there are fond memories of him skulking around the corridors—it was not him skulking around the corridors, it is the memories.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There will not be different organisations, and the structure will still be the same. It would be wholly wrong for people to swap armbands every afternoon or every second day according to who they were visiting. In the vast majority of cases, they will stick with the symbols that are already known—the red cross and the red crescent. However, there may be circumstances in which a national organisation, working only within its own territory, wants to incorporate within the crystal its own symbol, for instance the red star of David. That could happen only in national circumstances, which seems sensible.

Likewise, if British defence medical agencies and services overseas judged in a particular conflict that using the red crystal rather than the red cross would afford them greater protection and bring greater understanding among the public, they would be free to do so. That choice has to be made on a pragmatic basis, but it should not change and flip-flop all the time, because that would itself undermine clarity. For the most part, I suspect that they will not need to take that step, but in some circumstances they will.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): Will the Minister pursue a little further the point that the right hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells) made? Can he confirm that the distinction will be between the internationally recognised protective symbols, which will now include the red crystal and which confer the right to protection upon an organisation or vehicle, and an indicative symbol such as the red star of David, which could be used within a national territory as part of a fundraising or publicity drive or as a means of identifying an individual or vehicle? Will it be only the cross, the crescent and the crystal that will confer the right to protection under both domestic and international law?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is right—he put it better than I could, as doubtless he often will in the many debates in which we engage, though I am not sure whether I shall admit to that on subsequent occasions.

There is a difference between using the emblem for protective purposes and using it for fundraising or for the relevant body in one's own country. That is why it is important to police the convention equally. We want to ensure that the Red Cross movement is not disaggregated or undermined.

Mr. Heald: Things could become very confusing. If every country has a choice between the red crescent, the red cross and the red crystal for protecting vehicles and in addition a local brand, such as a red antelope or a red star of David, how on earth will people in places where there are armies that are not well organised like the British Army, but are in wars in informal settings and not much cop, be clear about what constitutes a protective symbol? It sounds like a recipe for confusion.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry if I have misled the hon. Gentleman—I never want to do that. We do not envisage every country in the world inventing its own brand, emblem or logo because, as he said, that would lead to confusion and undermine the whole proposal. People use the existing emblems because they afford protection. If they no longer afforded protection, people would not use them. If there were so many emblems as to cause confusion, that would undermine the structure and point of the Red Cross movement. That is why the provision is tied up with so much determination by all the states that are signatories to the convention to deal robustly with any abuse of the emblems. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) is leaning forward desirously.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the Under-Secretary on his new post. Who decides which symbol or emblem will be used in a particular country? He talks about signatories to the convention, but how many have signed up to the proposal and how many have so far ratified it?

Chris Bryant: I thought somebody might ask that question and I have the answer. Forty counties, including Israel, have ratified and a further 48 have signed but have yet to complete the ratification process. So we are doing well. If British armed forces medical services were taking part in a war entirely on a British basis, Britain would decide which emblem afforded its medical services the greatest protection. In the vast majority of cases, it will be the red cross. If we were part of a multinational operation, it would make sense for the whole operation to decide how to proceed. Otherwise, as hon. Members have said, a proliferation of different symbols would undermine the protection that an emblem affords. I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman.

I will try to answer some further questions. A few hon. Members have referred to the combination of emblems. As the hon. Member—or the hon. chorister—for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said, when used by armed forces medical and religious personnel as protection against attack in a conflict, the emblems cannot be used in combination. Only the four distinctive emblems can be used for protective purposes. For indicative purposes, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, national societies in the various states that decide to use the red crystal may choose to incorporate the red cross, the red crescent or

the red star of David in the red crystal when using it in conformity with relevant national legislation. A national society—for example, the British Red Cross—may use and display the combined emblem only within its national territory. That means that the British Red Cross could display an emblem showing the red cross in the frame of the red crystal, but only to promote its activities in the UK.

2.45 pm

In a previous debate in another place, there was some discussion about the protection afforded to United Nations facilities in Gaza. We were all troubled by the events at the end of last year, and the Prime Minister made Britain's view very clear. International humanitarian law protects all persons who take no active part in the hostilities against attack, regardless of whether they use a protective emblem. That includes UN personnel and the facilities that they use. In the UN context, only medical and religious personnel participating in operations under its auspices can use the red crystal, the red cross and the red crescent. The UN facilities in Gaza could not therefore use any of the humanitarian emblems, but they were marked with UN symbols to protect them against attack.

Some hon. Members have raised the related matter of cluster munitions. We are keen to move forward with legislation on that and we shall do so when parliamentary time allows.

Members in the House of Lords raised the signing of protocol V of the United Nations convention on certain conventional weapons in November 2003, and hon. Members may therefore be interested in that. Discussions are continuing between the Departments involved to work out the arrangements for funding our future obligations, which arise from the protocol. It has proved more difficult than any of us anticipated to resolve the potential future financial liability arising from ratification. In the meantime, the UK follows the principles enshrined in the protocol, regardless of whether we have been able to ratify.

I do not think that I need to make further comments on the first clause. I hope that, despite the slightly querulous questioning about whether we are multiplying the number of emblems too much, all hon. Members will feel that the clause is the right way in which to proceed.

Mr. Lidington: I am grateful to the Minister for his introduction to the clause, and I shall not oppose the stand part motion at the debate's conclusion. I shall simply make a couple of brief points.

I was intrigued when the Minister, almost in parenthesis, referred to the old symbol of the red lion and sun, which the royalist regime in Iran employed. I think I understood him to say that, although the symbol is no longer used, it remains a part of the appropriate conventions and it could be revived in future by some hypothetical Government in Iran, or somewhere else in the world, who chose to revert to the red lion and sun.

The adoption of the red crystal is the outcome of pragmatic negotiations and I am pleased that the decision means that it will be possible at long last for the Israeli and the Palestinian humanitarian organisations to participate fully in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent family.

Chris Bryant: Just for the sake of completeness, I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that the red lion and sun is available for use only in Iran.

Mr. Lidington: I am grateful to the Minister for making that point clear.

The Minister said that the British Red Cross Society was strongly behind clause 1 and the Bill as a whole, and I can certainly vouch for that. I would say to those of my hon. Friends who perhaps still harbour some uncertainty about the measures that, having earlier this year met the chairman of the British Red Cross Society and the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Dr. Kellenberger, I am completely satisfied that both organisations strongly support what is proposed in clause 1 and the Bill as a whole.

I was grateful for the Minister's assurances that it would be wrong to see the red crystal as a symbol that was intended to supplant either the red cross or the red crescent; were that to become the case, it would arouse considerable disquiet among the many thousands of people in all our constituencies who have given freely of their time and money over the years to support the efforts of the British Red Cross Society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) referred in an intervention to the potential use of the red crystal by British troops. I noted that the Minister said that its use by British forces would be a pragmatic decision for field commanders to take on the basis of circumstances and that no presumption would be made that they should abandon the red cross. I would simply express the clear view that it would be wrong were there to be any pressure or any assumption on the part of the Ministry of Defence that such a change ought to be made. It is better for the confidence of the British public that the red cross, which is the symbol that people in this country recognise and respect, should continue to be used by our armed forces wherever possible. A departure from that principle should certainly be the exception, rather than be allowed to become the norm.

With that slight reservation, I am happy to give my support to clause 1.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): This has been a fascinating and informative debate, not least because we have found out the birthday and occupation of the Minister's relations. It is always interesting to have some new information and some anecdotes to lighten the debate.

This is an important debate on an important Bill, which the Government are right to introduce and ensure that the UK passes. To people in this country, the red cross is seen not as a religious symbol but as something entirely neutral. However, if that is not the case in some places in the world, and if that can lead to confusion and, potentially, endanger people who are doing important work, it is obviously right that the international community should act to change the situation. I am sure we have all received information and leaflets from the ICRC encouraging us to support the Bill. We have had some debate about the origins of the cross and how it has been used by different cultures. In some contexts, the red cross is obviously seen as religious, but it is worth bearing in mind the fact that it is the reversal of the Swiss flag, and therefore represents neutrality.

[Jo Swinson]

I was intrigued by the Bill's description of the crystal, which it defines as

"the emblem of a red frame in the shape of a square on edge on a white ground, conforming to the illustration in Article 1 of the Annex to the third protocol".

As was remarked upon in previous stages, this Bill is one of the first to include a diagram.

Chris Bryant: This is not the first Bill to do that: the Bill that became the Geneva Conventions Act 1957 did so as well. It is just a shame that we cannot print in red.

Jo Swinson: A mine of intriguing information is our Minister. Presumably the 1957 Act introduced the red cross, but I wonder whether he could say in summing up whether it introduced the red crescent too or whether that was introduced in a later Act.

The shape in the Bill, which is described as a crystal, could also be described as a diamond. Indeed, at election time I have been known to have posters in the shape of a diamond—at least we tend to call them diamonds. However, the marketing manager in me was quite impressed that, after all the discussion about the most appropriate shape, we have called the shape a crystal rather than a diamond. We therefore have that nice alliteration, with the red cross, the red crescent and the red crystal. It seems that everything has been thought of.

In answer to an intervention, the Minister said that 40 countries had ratified the measures and that another 48 had signed up to them. I do not want to confuse this point with the debate on clause 2—I appreciate that the protocols in clause 2 have also been signed and ratified by a certain number of countries—but I wonder whether the Minister could inform us in his final remarks whether a certain number is needed for the measures to come into effect. I appreciate that that is the case for the other protocols—the Minister pointed out on Second Reading that a further number was required, and I think that the magic number was 22. Some time has passed between that debate and this debate, so it would be welcome to know whether the provisions are yet in effect or whether we still await that.

I would like to welcome the Minister's comments about cluster munitions and the fact that the Government have moved from their position of allowing so-called smart cluster bombs, which none the less maim and kill indiscriminately. I very much welcome the Minister's commitment to find time for the Government to bring forward the ban on such munitions. It is important when we are discussing the technicalities of a symbol that will be used in war zones that we remember the horrors that are experienced where such symbols are used. We are talking about people being wounded and killed in the most horrific circumstances, so the issue is of the gravest importance.

The general consensus is welcome, and I will be supporting clause 1.

Mr. Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute) (LD): This has been an interesting and informative debate. I am fully in support of the Bill, but I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to a couple of the points that have arisen.

First, I have a slight concern about the possible proliferation of symbols. It was mentioned that although the Iranians do not currently use the red lion and sun, they still have the right to use it. Can the Minister clarify whether they have the right to use it only in Iran or could they use it anywhere in the world, and if so, could that cause confusion?

My second point is about implementation. When does the international agreement come into effect? Does it need a certain number of countries to ratify it? At what point will the new red crystal be used as a symbol of protection? Once countries have ratified the agreement, are they entitled to use the symbol or is there a point at which the whole world would be entitled to use it? I would be grateful for clarification on those two points.

Mr. Hayes: As the Minister and the shadow Minister said, this is not a partisan matter, but it is an important one and, in my judgment, it requires a rather fuller exploration than it has enjoyed thus far, although I do not say that in a pejorative way.

As one might expect with such a short Bill, clause 1 goes to the heart of the matter. The Bill's purpose is, in essence, to amend previous Acts, in particular the Geneva Conventions Act 1957, which I hope to say a little more about in my contribution. Inasmuch as the Bill amends the 1957 Act, much of what we have discussed so far has focused on the change to that Act in respect of emblems. We debated this matter on Second Reading, but at that stage we did not know quite how the Bill would fare in the other place. Since then, I have received representations on the issue—I am sure that other hon. Members have as well—from a variety of agencies and constituents.

This is first of all about symbols, protocols and conventions. When the Minister says that the cross might cause offence, I am minded to reprise the remarks of G. K. Chesterton, who said that those who dislike the cross do so not because it is a dead symbol but because it is a live symbol. The cross has significance not only because it is recognised as a Christian symbol but because it has been associated with Christian and non-Christian cultures since time immemorial as a symbol of peace, good health and good spirit.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman cites G. K. Chesterton, but Chesterton had a very firm understanding of the theological significance of the cross. He referred to it primarily in a proselytising sense. Indeed, that might be the potential danger in its use. I should also like to point out that I never used the word "offence" in relation to the cross. This is merely a question of whether people might misunderstand the red cross and take it to have an exclusively religious significance that is not intended.

Mr. Hayes: Of course that is true about Chesterton. He was making a case for a Christian emblem. The case that I am making is that the living nature of the cross extends beyond that narrow definition. The cross is perceived fairly universally as a symbol of peace, of the union of heaven and earth, and of the sun and the stars. It is seen as a world centre and a cosmic axis. It represents the human form, with its four cardinal points. It can map the fourfold system, the four directions—north, south, east and west—the four seasons and the four elements.

In Christian imagery, as the Minister is well qualified to attest, the cross usually has an elongated southern element, because the cross in Christian imagery represents the crucifix. The red cross does not look like a crucifix; it is a simple cross, each part of which is the same length. It has a symmetry. Of course I accept that the red crescent was adopted because of the doubts that the Minister has articulated—the debate on this matter has gone on for a long time—but I am not sure that those doubts are well founded, given the universality of the cross.

When we debated the new symbol, the Minister acknowledged that it would not gain immediate acceptance because it might not be recognised straight away. Therein lies the nub of the problem. If the principle of a cross or a crescent is that it is widely recognisable and universally understood, and that its protective value as a device lies in that comprehension, a symbol that does not proffer immediate recognition might not proffer the protection that it is designed to provide.

I do not want to dwell on the specifics of the symbol at this point, but to set the matter in context. As I have said, this debate has been going on almost since the beginning of the Red Cross movement. A lively debate has been conducted since the end of the 19th century on whether the cross should be the movement's only symbol, and whether it was the appropriate symbol to use in all places at all times. That was the very debate that gave rise to the adoption of the red crescent.

The problem with the solution proposed in the Bill is that it would be entirely possible for a multiplication of symbols to emerge, as has been suggested by several contributors to the debate. It is possible that, once this new symbol has been adopted, others might make similar claims. The point about universality is important. It is probable that we will get away with having one more symbol, which is why my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and the Red Cross itself have said that they will not oppose the proposal. But what would happen if we were to add one or two more symbols? At what point would the recognition that lies at the heart of a symbol's value become compromised? I make no judgment about that; I simply raise the point for hon. Members' consideration. Indicative devices show the link that a person or object has with a movement. Once that link has been broken in terms of popular perception, the device loses its force. Emblems should typically bear additional information, as most emblems do not speak for themselves. They imply more than the simplicity of a red cross.

It is important to set all these considerations in their historical context. The Red Cross is the world's largest humanitarian movement, with approximately 97 million volunteers worldwide. As the Minister said, it was inspired by Henry Dunant after his experience of seeing the dead and dying lying forlorn. He felt that something should be done on a non-partisan basis to ease their suffering and to deal with similar tragic circumstances. He wrote about that after the battle of Solferino in 1859, and I recommend his book to Members, because it makes the case that lies at the heart of these considerations.

Henry Dunant proposed the creation of national relief societies made up of volunteers trained in peacetime to provide neutral and impartial help to relieve suffering in times of war. Central to his concerns was his second proposal, which was to establish an international agreement—this became the Geneva conventions, as we now know—to oversee the support and humanitarian assistance that he craved. The proposals in the final resolutions at the conference that ensued from his efforts were adopted in October 1863. They are simple, and they are highly relevant to this part of the Bill. They included proposals for the foundation of a national relief society for wounded soldiers, for neutrality and for the protection of the wounded, for the utilisation of volunteer forces for the relief and assistance of those on battlefields, for the organisation of additional conferences to enact these concepts in legally binding international treaties, and for the introduction of a common, distinctive protection symbol for medical personnel in the field—namely, a white armlet bearing a red cross.

The armlet bearing a red cross was the original protection symbol declared at the 1864 Geneva convention. It represents a reversal of the Swiss national flag, and it was adopted to honour the Swiss founder of the movement, Henry Dunant, and his home country. That is interesting in itself, because few would argue that the Swiss flag is specifically identified by most reasonable people as a Christian flag. *[Interruption.]* I understand why the Minister is shaking his head, but most people do not think of the Swiss flag first and foremost as a Christian emblem.

Ideas to introduce a uniform and neutral protection symbol, as well as a specific design, came from the original founding members of the international committee. The red cross was initially defined as a protection symbol under article 7 of chapter VII of the Geneva convention of 1864—"The distinctive emblem"—and then under article 38 of the Geneva convention of 1949—

"For the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field".

There is an unofficial agreement within the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements that the shape of the cross should be of a cross composed of five squares. I argued earlier that the distinctiveness of the red cross and the difference between it and the kind of cross typically used in Christian imagery are highly pertinent. However, regardless of the shape, any red cross on a white background should be valid and must be recognised as a protection symbol in conflicts.

Here I believe the Minister has a valid point. Although the red cross that we all think of first when we think about the Red Cross movement is the one used officially on most occasions, in the heat of battle as it were, other red crosses might be used that could be more easily misinterpreted. I take the Minister's point that he did not use the word "offence", but I am going to use it and say that it could give rise to offence, making such a symbol less useful or worse. I do not therefore disregard the points raised by the Minister and others about the need to be sensitive on this subject, but I do really worry about the possibility of the proliferation of the number of symbols and any effect that might have on universal recognition.

Dr. Howells: I am fascinated by the hon. Gentleman's historical lesson, which is very instructive, but I want to tease something out of him. Is he worried about the possibility that iconoclastic leaders such as Chavez, Ahmadinejad or Kim Il Jung would want their own

[Dr. Howells]

symbols for nationalistic purposes and to reinforce their independence? Is that the sort of proliferation that he is worried about?

Mr. Hayes: It is interesting to hear the right hon. Gentleman put it that way. I had not wanted to make a case quite as arch as that, as I did not at first think that symbols could be used in such a malevolent way. I was more concerned about confusion or even mischievous use. He is quite right, however, that it may well be worse than that and my concerns about confusion may well be an underestimation of the problem. It is indeed possible for the malevolent proliferation of symbols to take place in tandem with a nationalistic approach, which would be entirely contrary and injurious to the principles established in those early days by the founders of the Red Cross movement and, indeed, those of the Red Crescent movement. Those principles are widely recognised throughout the House as doing immeasurable good, so the right hon. Gentleman makes a useful point about what might happen. I know that the Minister will be as concerned as anyone about that and will do all he can on behalf of the Government to ensure that those possibilities are excluded, if at all possible, in the councils in which these issues are debated.

I do not wish to prolong these matters, but I was about to say that of the 186 national societies currently recognised by the International Committee of the Red Cross, 152 use the red cross as their official organisational emblem. In addition, the red cross is used by the national society of Tuvalu, which has applied for official recognition. Henri Dunant, who has figured largely—and not unreasonably so—in our considerations, also proposed that countries should adopt an international agreement that will recognise the status of medical services and the wounded on the battlefield. The resulting Geneva convention is now widely recognised by countries throughout the world as providing relief and support to the victims of international conflicts, disasters and wars. That includes refugees from the Hungarian revolution of 1956, from Vietnam in 1976, from the Iranian earthquake in 1962 and the famine in Africa in 1989; and in the UK, the British Red Cross has provided emergency relief following the disaster in Aberfan, the Lockerbie air disaster, the Easter floods in 1998 and the devastating summer floods in 2007.

3.15 pm

The reason all that is important in respect of this part of the Bill and the Bill as a whole is that there is no guarantee that we are merely talking about proliferation of symbols internationally. The worry is not about the support of the Red Cross movement, but that independent people might choose to use a different symbol here. That is something that I hope the Minister will say a few words about.

The more symbols there are in existence, the more there are to choose from; there is no guarantee that mistakenly, mischievously, perhaps even malevolently, people will not choose to use symbols other than the red cross, even within our own borders. The white flag has been recognised as a sign of the wish to negotiate or surrender, and firing on anyone displaying it in good faith is forbidden. With the addition of the red cross, the flag's message is taken a stage further, demanding respect for the wounded and for anyone coming to their aid.

Let us not forget that the institution of the Red Cross was set up to transcend national borders and religious differences. There remains little evidence that the institution or the red cross itself was intended to have Christian connotations. I know that soldiers of the Ottoman empire claimed that it caused offence to Muslims, which is why we had the debate about the red crescent so long ago and indeed it explains why the red crescent was instituted. But there remains an argument that it would be better to reaffirm the red cross—as the ICRC wanted to do, as the Minister will know, in 1949. I nevertheless understand the Minister's point and the purpose and good will that lies behind what he said to the House and what is in this measure.

I want to say a little more about the debate that took place in 1957, simply because a brief examination of the *Hansard* on that occasion reveals how support for the red cross was well embedded when I suppose the memory of the second world war was altogether more alive in the House and in the hearts and minds of the Members who debated the convention at that time. The Member representing Plymouth, Devonport spoke eloquently and movingly in that debate about her work in both the British and the international Red Cross, though I shall not detain the House, however, by quoting chapter and verse from that debate.

We were invited in earlier contributions to say a few words about Israel. I propose to do so before we move on to clause 2, because it is highly relevant to clause 1. The Minister alluded to—although he did not, understandably, provide much detail—the controversy over Israel's national society, Magen David Adom and the dispute over the neutral protection symbols used in Israel. The idea of a red crystal—previously referred to as a red lozenge or red diamond—had its genesis as a result of that debate, and it proved to be the most popular of the various symbols that were suggested as additions to the red cross and red crescent. However, as we now understand, amending the Geneva conventions to add a new protection symbol requires a diplomatic conference of all 192 state signatories to the conventions. That conference was held in 2005, organised by the Swiss Government, to adopt the third symbol. It introduced the red crystal, which is illustrated in the Bill, detailed in the explanatory notes and referred to in the clause.

The third protocol refers to the new symbol as the third protocol emblem. The rules for the use of the symbol are based on the third additional protocol to the Geneva conventions. First, the protocol states:

"Within its own national territory, a national society can use either of the recognized symbols ... alone, or incorporate any of these symbols or a combination of them into the Red Crystal."

That possibility exacerbates the risk that I described earlier. It is not merely that different symbols could be used in different places, but also that different symbols could be used in the same place, or used in combination in the same place. That could be—I put it no more strongly—a recipe for confusion, possibly even for disaster.

Secondly, the protocol establishes that

"a national society which does not use one of the recognized symbols as its emblem has to incorporate its unique symbol into the Red Crystal, based on the previously mentioned condition about communicating its unique symbol to the state parties of the Geneva Conventions."

Thirdly, it adds:

"For protective use, only the symbols recognized by the Geneva Conventions can be used. Specifically, those national societies which do not use one of the recognized symbols as their emblem have to use the Red Crystal without incorporation of any additional symbol."

On 22 June 2006, the ICRC announced that the International Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement were adopting the red crystal as an additional emblem for use by the national societies, and announced the recognition of the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the Israeli national society Magen David Adom. On 14 January 2007, the third additional protocol entered into force. What we are doing here, as is necessary, is amending legislation in accordance with those changes.

I had not intended to say anything about the red lion and sun, which has also been mentioned. However, if fear of proliferation lies at the heart of the lingering doubts felt by some of us about these proposals, that is coloured to some extent by the fact that from 1924 until 1980 Iran used a red lion and sun symbol for its national society, based on the dynastic flag and emblem associated with that country. The red lion and sun was formally recognised as a protection symbol in 1929, together with the red crescent, and despite its shift to the red crescent in 1980, Iran explicitly maintains the right to use the symbol. It is therefore still recognised by the Geneva convention as a protection symbol with status equal to that of the red cross, the red crescent and, now, the new red crystal. Contrary to what might be assumed, we do not have one, two or even three symbols; we have four that are recognised, are established, and can be used as a matter of choice.

I shall not say much about the red shield of David, but Israel has used it as an organisational symbol since its foundation. It was initially proposed as an addition to the red cross, but that is not entirely relevant to this part of the Bill.

I have no doubt that the intention behind the proposal is honourable, and that good will prevails. That has been exemplified by what has been said today by the Minister and other speakers, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury. He has spoken to representatives of the Red Cross in the United Kingdom, who have said that they have no objection to the measure. Nevertheless, for the reasons that I have given, it is important for us to explore the subject.

Since Second Reading, I have received letters and representations from constituents and others expressing doubt about the advisability of adding the new symbol, and also confusion about its meaning. This is a complex matter, but I invite the Minister to consider the possibility that the anodyne nature of the crystal may be tantamount to ambiguity about its meaning and purpose. Had we defeated the programme motion and been allowed the longer time for debate that was desirable, I would have spoken in much greater detail about the subject of signs and symbols. It is at the core of the debate, and requires more consideration than we are able to give it.

To be useful and meaningful, a symbol must transmit a clear message. It need not communicate that message in the same specific way as a sign—that is the difference between a sign and a symbol, is it not?—but there must be a degree of clarity about its intent. When we think of something that "signposts", we think of something very particular; when we think of something being symbolic of something else, we envisage a slightly broader concept. A symbol is not a sign, but it must have meaning none the less. I have some doubts about the crystal in that context. Because of the effort that has been made not to be contentious, it is possibly rather too anodyne to serve its purpose.

I end my speech with those few remarks, which betray a certain scepticism on my part, but certainly no hostility towards either the measure or the Minister. I hope that we can soon move on to the rather more meaty and lengthy debate that will be necessary to deal with the other clauses.

Mr. Moss: I assume, Mrs. Heal, that I will be in order if I speak in the clause stand part debate about the schedule to the Bill and its proposed schedule 7 to the Geneva Conventions Act 1957, as clause 1(8) refers to inserting schedule 7 after schedule 6, and at our rate of progress this afternoon I doubt whether we will ever reach the schedule, let alone Third Reading.

3.30 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Sylvia Heal): Yes, as I doubt very much that we will reach a debate on proposed schedule 7, it is indeed appropriate for the hon. Member to comment on it at this stage.

Mr. Moss: Thank you very much, Mrs. Heal.

Proposed schedule 7 states:

"*Recalling further* that National Societies undertaking activities on the territory of another State must ensure that the emblems they intend to use within the framework of such activities may be used in the country where the activity takes place and in the country or countries of transit."

This comes back to a question that I put to the Minister in an intervention: who decides? The phrase "may be used" suggests that permission for a symbol to be used needs to be given by the country that our armed forces are operating in or travelling through. Is that vested in international law—in other words, does the country have to have signed up to the Geneva Conventions Act 1957—or does the local law of the country itself determine whether it accepts a particular symbol? Also, if contiguous countries have different views, will our armed forces and their vehicles have to keep switching their symbols as they move from one country to another? The Minister may not be able to answer that right away, but I would like an answer at some juncture, if possible.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) made a highly informative and fascinating—if also slightly sceptical—speech. At the end of it, he invited me to speak about semiotics and the difference between signs and symbols. Most of my university English degree seemed to be obsessed with Saussurian analysis of semiotics, and then when I arrived at theological college I had to discuss the hermeneutical circle for about three years. *[Interruption.]* It is not that difficult to spell "hermeneutical". I remember very clearly a Scottish theologian who taught at Oxford saying as part of his address on systematic theology and symbolism in religion that a lot of people ask, "What do we mean by God?" but we should really be asking, "What do we mean by 'mean'?" Therefore, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not return to the hermeneutical circle this afternoon. However, I would just say that on these issues I am closer to Urs von Balthasar and Coleridge than I am to Lacan.

Mr. Hayes: What the whole House wants to know is: what does the Minister mean by "what"?

Chris Bryant: I am not sure the Minister understands what he means by "mean" or "what" in this particular circumstance, so let us move on to the issue of the cross and whether it could raise offence. The hon. Gentleman pointed to various different ways in which the cross can be interpreted but, of course, the possible interpretations depend on whether one is referring to the Cross with a capital C, which for many Christians is the Cross on which Jesus died. How that should be presented has been hotly disputed between Catholics and Protestants over the years; one dispute is about whether the symbol of a Cross should be used at all in churches. Therefore, the religious connotations that can be attached—and are attached by many people—either for good or ill can make it more difficult in certain, limited, circumstances for the Red Cross movement to be able to do its job. If that is the case, we need to have the additional symbols. For me, the fact that it is the Red Cross imparts an element of the concept of Christian charity to the work of the Red Cross, but I understand that others think of that in a pejorative sense, not a positive sense. They might also think of the child being baptised with the sign of the Cross and being told to fight valiantly for Christ against the devil. For many people, that is not a positive symbol. The hon. Gentleman also said that the Red Cross symbol is different from any other crosses as its arms and legs, as it were, are of equal length, but so are those of the cross of St. George and I do not think anybody doubts that the cross of St. George is a religious symbol.

Let me clarify a couple of other matters. Several Members mentioned the issue of the red lion and sun and whether that is to be used only in Iran or only by Iran. The situation is that it is for Iran—properly speaking, it was for Persia—to use, and it has not done so since 1980. I do not think other countries or peoples would want, or choose, to do so, so it is not a matter that arises in any case.

Mr. Hayes: Would there be a purpose then in detaching the red lion from the protocol, or would it be better to just let it wither on the vine?

Chris Bryant: In my estimation, it would be an unnecessary row to have. It would also involve many other countries trying to agree a new protocol, and I cannot see that there would be any great value in that. It sits there and is not greatly used. It stemmed originally from 13th century Persian understandings, but it is not used.

The other issue to which I should refer is the question of when this comes into effect. The original protocol makes it clear that it comes into effect when two countries have ratified. I have a list of those who have signed and ratified, and a separate list of those who have signed. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) asked me which countries are on the list, but I think that it would be unnecessary to read them out. I am happy to write to her so that she can compare notes. There is no greater requirement than two countries ratifying, so it has already come into operation.

Without further ado—

Mr. Moss *rose*—

Chris Bryant: Well, apparently there will be further ado.

Mr. Moss: The Minister has not answered my question. If the answer is long in coming, perhaps he would undertake to write to me with an explanation. That would be satisfactory.

Chris Bryant: More to the point, the Minister cannot remember the question, so whether he would be able to remember the answer is quite another matter—*[Interruption.]* I know that it related to schedule 7, and the hon. Gentleman referred to line 36, but I think that he meant line 36 on the first page of the schedule, because it has several line 36s. I will write to him at length on the issue, although I do not think that it will prevent him from supporting the clause. For the sake of the fullness of the debate, I will be happy to write to him. Without further ado, I shall now sit down.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

Amendments of the United Nations Personnel Act 1997

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Chris Bryant: I hope that hon. Members, albeit in a slightly querulous and sceptical mode, will also support clause 2 standing part of the Bill. It will amend the United Nations Personnel Act 1997 to incorporate the optional protocol to the convention on the safety of United Nations and associated personnel. The original Act has been used to protect operations maintaining or restoring international peace and security and operations in which an exceptional risk exists.

It has been necessary to bring forward the optional protocol because there is a loophole: there are operations that are not maintaining or restoring international peace and security, but are peace building. They go beyond the stage of peacekeeping, but the Security Council has not determined that an exceptional risk exists. Consequently, the full protection afforded by the 1997 Act and the convention is not extended to those operations.

First, we must amend UK law to give effect to the optional protocol, and that is what we are doing this afternoon. Next comes the process of ratification, whereby we lay down the optional protocol before Parliament, under the Ponsonby rule, and after 21 days it is considered to be ratified. We then lodge the instruments of ratification and accession with the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

In the previous debate, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) asked when the provision came into force. She was right to say that it comes into force when 22 countries have ratified and sent their instruments of ratification and accession to the Secretary-General. At the moment, there are 19 on the list, so when we add ourselves there will be 20. The countries involved include Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bolivia, Botswana, Bulgaria, the Central African Republic, Chile, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Guatemala, Jamaica, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Mali, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, the

Republic of Korea, Romania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Ukraine and Uruguay.

As I am sure hon. Members are aware, there are a large number of UN peacekeeping and peace-building missions around the world, from the presence in the middle east that started in 1948 to the mission in the Central African Republic and in Chad, which started only in 2008 when an EU mission handed over to the UN and where we are dealing with a lot of the knock-on effect from Darfur. In countries such as Burundi, the mission is a peace-building mission, as we have moved on from peacekeeping. It is important, none the less, that UN people who are working there have the full protection that would otherwise be afforded them.

Dr. Howells: My hon. Friend just read out a long list of countries, some of which I found very surprising. Mali, for one, has a Government who are trying to combat terrorism and is the recipient of help from the UN and other bodies. It is also where we have just seen the al-Qaeda murder of a British citizen. In a situation such as that in Afghanistan, where the mission is UN-led but has all manner of activities going on, including fighting and reconstruction—often in the same place—how does one distinguish between somebody who is classified as a UN worker and is therefore the recipient of protection under the terms of this amendment and others, and somebody who is a fighter and, presumably, not the recipient of the same protection, despite the fact that they are both being led by the UN on a clearly defined mission?

Chris Bryant: The protection is afforded to those who are directly involved in the UN peacekeeping mission and to those who are employed by direct agencies of the UN. It does not extend to further bodies. The truth is that in the various different missions around the world, the level of risk is differently estimated. We are keen to ensure that all the countries in which there are missions at present sign up. It is true that not all the countries where there are missions have so far signed up. That is why, although there will not be much immediate impact in the UK—we do not intend to have UN peacekeeping missions to the UK, so there is no direct likelihood of any such eventuality in this country—our ratification of the provision is part of the process of encouraging other countries to ratify that might otherwise be reluctant to do so. Obviously, that is true for countries as divergent as Liberia and Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend mentioned Afghanistan, where there was a UN assistance mission, which is now a political mission. The situation is similar in Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is good that Cyprus has now ratified—that is somewhere where there is a UN peacekeeping mission. Our aim is to create the universality of protection that he envisages.

3.45 pm

Mr. Lidington: If I heard him correctly, the Minister said a moment ago that not all countries with UN missions had yet signed up. However, his predecessor, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), who is now a Minister of State at the Department of Health, said on Second Reading that

"five countries with UN missions in their territories"—

I presume that she meant UN peace building missions—

"have signed the protocol."—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2009; Vol. 490, c. 980.]

I am not trying to trip up the Minister, but it would be helpful for the House to be clear about this. One question that I have raised previously about this part of the Bill has to do with the fact that the optional protocol does not define "peace building" in the way that earlier protocols defined "peace making". That does not pose an immediate problem if those countries with peace-building missions have signed up already, but there could be a problem in the future when it comes to defining exactly what sort of UN activity is covered by the additional protection being given.

Chris Bryant: I think that the hon. Gentleman is right, and I apologise if I inadvertently misled him. As I understand it, the five countries with peace-building missions have signed up, but if I am wrong I shall be happy to write to him. However, there are missions in 16 countries, and they obviously vary in their aims and the goals that they are intended to pursue. The point is that peacekeeping missions already have protection, whereas those missions involved in peace building that the Security Council has not said are at serious risk do not have protection. As the Security Council has never said that about any mission, it is clear that there is a legal loophole that the optional protocol is designed to tidy up.

I have to correct an impression that I gave earlier to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, and which has to do with the number of countries that have signed and ratified the optional protocol. Thirty-four countries have signed the optional protocol, and 18 have ratified it. That number will become 19 if we ratify it, and 22 countries have to do so for the optional protocol to come into force.

Mr. Hayes: The Minister will be delighted to know that this will be my final intervention, but clause 2 deals with the optional protocol that extends the convention's authority to deal with humanitarian aid. However, as the right hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells) suggested, it brings us back to the issue of protection, and to signs and symbols. Will the Minister buttonhole this once and for all? Surely a sign has a strictly limited meaning but a symbol, as Jung argued, is far more subtle. When we use a symbol, we imply or suggest all that lies behind it. Does the Minister agree that, when it comes to protection, that is critical? He is well qualified to answer that, as he is Jung at heart.

Chris Bryant: I think that I can match that. There is a very fine book called "Jung and the Christian Way", written by a Christopher Bryant—although not this one. The author is a different Christopher Bryant, but I have read the book and could expand at length about what it says about the collective subconscious and the rest, although I do not think that that would be strictly relevant to clause 2.

However, I think that I can help the House by saying that the protocol covers UN personnel or contractors only. That means that UN peacekeepers are covered, but NATO troops are not—a clear distinction, as the latter are not UN personnel.

Dr. Howells: I am sorry to interrupt again on this point, but it is very important. I have been in some of the armpits of the world and have seen UN peace

[Dr. Howells]

builders and keepers doing amazing work, but they have been able to do that work only because they have had NATO personnel guarding them. How does one differentiate a UN worker—they are clearly defined in the schedules and the original agreements—from NATO or other troops, without whose protection UN workers cannot work? How do we convince the enemy—insurgents, the Taliban or whoever—that those workers are not there simply because they are being guarded and allowed to be there by troops who are not covered by these provisions?

Chris Bryant: I have not been to so many of the places to which my right hon. Friend refers; my own experience has been in places such as Bosnia, where the EU was doing its business of peace building. It is difficult to distinguish between peacekeeping and peace building, but after a while one realises that that is what one is definitely doing. Thus, processes such as going house to house to ensure that any rocket launchers left in people's garages are taken off them are all part of the process of peace building. Similarly, my right hon. Friend is right to say that people who want to prevent peace from taking hold may choose to interpret as part of the enemy anybody involved in a humanitarian effort and who is being protected by troops, but that does not mean that we should not ensure that they are afforded the protection that they need.

I wish to correct myself on one issue relating to something that the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said. The five countries where there are UN peace-building missions have signed, but I cannot be certain that they have ratified. It is difficult to tell whether or not that makes a material difference, but I shall write to him specifically on that point.

Jo Swinson: I want to follow up on who would be covered by this measure. I welcomed the fact that on Second Reading the Minister's predecessor said that

"we continue to press for a fuller set of protections".—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2009; Vol. 490, c. 980.]

I say that because the other group of people who are not covered but who do an essential job of rebuilding countries and working in war zones are humanitarian workers for non-governmental organisations. They, too, face dreadful threats—as we saw, 2008 was one of the worst years for aid workers being killed—so will the Minister repeat the assertion that the Government will continue to press for fuller protection?

Chris Bryant: Absolutely. The NGOs do an extraordinary job in many parts of the world, and they do work that could not be done by governmental organisations and agencies. They sometimes have that extra reach into the local community by definition of the fact that they are non-governmental, but if that means that they do not have the protection that they require, it makes it more difficult for them to do that job of work. There is often a judgment to be made on the ground as to how one best advances the process of peace and makes it flourish rather than just lie on stony ground. I wholeheartedly support the point that the hon. Lady makes. I hope that the whole House will support this clause, and I urge hon. Members to do so.

Mr. Lidington: I am happy to offer my support for the clause, which is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the existing protocols and the protections conferred by them. My only difficulty is over what the protocol omits. I agreed with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) when she said that one would hope to see, at some future stage, this form of protection extended to humanitarian workers for NGOs. I am troubled by the absence in the protocol of a clear definition of peace building and by the opt-out that countries retain under subsection (4) in respect of operations

"to deliver emergency humanitarian assistance"—

on their territories—

"in response to natural disaster".

I simply cannot understand the purpose of that opt-out arrangement.

I am also concerned that the provisions in the Bill, resting as they do upon the protocol, appear to exclude from the additional protection regional peacekeeping operations and operations that, although authorised by the United Nations Security Council, are under either national or regional control, rather than direct United Nations control.

I accept that the protocol is the product of prolonged international negotiation—negotiation that must have been difficult. It is better than no protocol at all, but I hope that the Government will show energy in pursuing further work and trying to ensure that the remaining loopholes are closed.

Jo Swinson: I support clause 2. Legal protection for UN personnel who are doing essential peace building and emergency humanitarian work is vital and, I would argue, long overdue. Those employees are working on behalf of the whole international community, but sadly they are under increased risk of attack and kidnap. In fact, according to Reuters, in 2008 some 122 people were killed in the course of aid work. That highlights the point that I raised earlier about the possibility of extending the protection further, beyond UN personnel.

Sadly, even just in the short time that the Bill has been discussed in the Houses of Parliament, we have seen on the news the requirement for it. On Second Reading, the Gaza conflict was uppermost in people's minds, as a result of the attack on the UN school. Since then, of course, we have seen dreadful scenes unfold in Sri Lanka, where hospitals have come under fire from artillery shells, and a Red Cross worker is reported to have died. We still do not know the full scale of the damage, death and destruction. Obviously, legal protection alone will not solve the problem. We do not wave a magic wand by agreeing to the protocol, but it is a step in the right direction. It is a deterrent, and it does at least give us the opportunity to act in pursuit of justice where atrocities have been committed.

As for applying the measures to the UK, obviously we hope and do not expect UN workers to come under attack in the UK. However, ratification would provide an international lead. It is good news that even since Second Reading two more countries have ratified; I note that *Hansard* shows that 16 countries had ratified at the time. Hopefully we will make it 19, and that leaves just three more before the measures are brought into force. I urge the Minister and his Department to use all possible diplomacy, as I am sure they will, to encourage

other countries to sign and ratify the protocols as soon as possible. With that, I reiterate my support for clause 2.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

3.58 pm

Chris Bryant: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am not sure that I can add anything further to the discussions that we have already had this afternoon. We have ranged widely through matters hermeneutical and semiotical, and many other matters. I cannot remember whether it was Aristotle, Seneca or somebody else who said that a small book is always a bad book. The truth is that a small Bill need not be a bad Bill. This is a good piece of legislation, and I am sure that all hon. Members will support it on Third Reading; I am grateful to the officials who have worked hard to make sure of that. I am also grateful to all the previous Ministers who ensured that the issue was brought forward, through diplomatic circles. I hope that the red crystal, and the greater protection that we can afford to peacekeeping and peace-building operations around the world, will significantly enhance the opportunities for peace and justice in this world, and I urge people to support the Bill on Third Reading.

3.59 pm

Mr. Lidington: This is a welcome piece of legislation, which the Opposition are happy to support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOTED HALF-DAY]

Dissolution of Parliament

4 pm

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House requests the Prime Minister to seek a dissolution of the present Parliament.

It is an honour to move the motion in my name and the names of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, the party of Wales. The case for the dissolution of the House of Commons is urgent, compelling and of greater importance than any party political interest.

It is clear that the public believe that this Parliament is without legitimacy, credibility or trust. The expenses scandal is the most recent cause of this public concern, but there are other causes that have undermined faith in the political process, including the decision taking us into an illegal and immoral war in Iraq that was based on a lie. We in the SNP and Plaid Cymru believe it is only by demonstrating our trust in the people through an immediate general election that we can begin to rebuild trust in parliamentary democracy.

Those who doubt the seriousness of the situation need to ask themselves how it has come to pass that fascists and neo-Nazis have been elected in the UK. I am certain that the good people of the north-west of England and of Yorkshire and the Humber are as horrified as the rest of us that holocaust deniers and anti-Semites now hold elected office. This aberration is a by-product of the crushing lack of credibility that affects the established UK political system at present.

Although I welcome the Ministers responding to the debate and congratulate them on their continuing and new responsibilities, it is noted in sorrow that the Prime Minister has chosen yet again not to be present. We hear a lot from the bunker at No. 10 Downing street about the need to reconnect with Parliament, but when it comes to debates about whether the people should be trusted, the Prime Minister is not here. In contrast, we are making the case for a rebuilding of trust, and we are happy to let the people decide.

It goes without saying that we in the SNP and Plaid Cymru wish the governance of our countries to take place from our national capitals, not the Palace of Westminster. Although I am certain we will secure further self-government shortly, this House of Commons will still play a role, in the short term at least, making laws over Scotland and Wales. So long as that is the case, we will demand the highest democratic standards in this place, as I am sure do Members in all parts of the House.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): The SNP Administration has been in Holyrood for just over two years. The fact is that in those two years this House has passed more legislation for the people of Scotland than the SNP Administration in Holyrood have.

Angus Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes his point about a very successful and popular SNP Government in Scotland, but rather than get involved in a party political partisan ding-dong on these issues, I ask him and his hon. Friends to listen to the argument that I shall make, which is about the credibility of this House as a whole. It is not about the Government, in my view. The case that I shall make does not involve the Government or the Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Secretary of State for Scotland would like to listen to that, rather than chuntering from a sedentary position.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman makes the point that the Prime Minister is not here, and he also talks about the credibility of this House. That is at the very root of his motion, which I totally support and on which I congratulate him. Will he also note, however, that the Tory Benches are pretty empty right now? Perhaps that is because so many MPs have second jobs. If the House is dissolved, there will be an election, and at that election candidates should declare what proportion of their time will go to, and what proportion of their earnings will come from, this place rather than second jobs.

Angus Robertson: The hon. Gentleman has made his point and it is on the record, but I want to return to the point that I want to make. At this stage, we want to make it clear that the motion affects the whole House—every party and independents, too. It is not a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister or the Government, and that is why I appeal to Members from all parts of the House to support it.

The evidence supporting the case for a general election is compelling, and the feedback that we have all heard on doorsteps throughout the country in the past few weeks has been overwhelming. It has been borne out in a series of recent, independent surveys. In *The Guardian* on 22 May, a poll conducted by ICM showed that two thirds of voters now say that the Prime Minister should call a general election before the end of the year; that more than half of voters believe that the Prime Minister should go to the country before the process of constitutional change can begin; and that only 30 per cent. think that the election should be delayed until 2010.

It is not just ICM and *The Guardian*, however: PoliticsHome conducted a poll on 20 May showing that 70 per cent. of respondents want an election now or within a few short months; Populus showed something similar for ITV; YouGov showed something similar for *The Daily Telegraph* at the end of May; and a YouGov poll for Channel 4 showed that 63 per cent. of respondents do not trust Members of this House of Commons much or at all.

Mr. Angus MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that Labour Members, who earlier this week wanted their own election in respect of the Prime Minister, should extend that courtesy to the rest of the country? If they want an election in the Labour party, they should make sure that the voters of the UK also have an election.

Angus Robertson: My hon. Friend gives an additional reason why there should be a general election. Many people throughout the country agree, and so do many Members from the governing party.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab) *rose*—

Angus Robertson: Perhaps this is one such hon. Gentleman now.

Chris Ruane: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The Scottish National party has form with this type of activity. In 1979, when you brought down a Labour Government, we had a Conservative Government—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. May I just remind the hon. Gentleman about using the correct parliamentary term?

Chris Ruane: The hon. Gentleman's party brought down a Labour Government, and that resulted in the Conservatives being in power for 18 years. Was that a good or a bad thing for the people of Scotland and Wales, let alone England?

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's history lesson; I was of course in primary 8 at that time. *[Interruption.]* It is true. I have already made the point— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Angus Robertson: The hon. Gentleman has clearly missed the point that I have been trying to make. This is a motion for the dissolution of Parliament; it is not a motion of no confidence in the Government or the Prime Minister. On that basis, I return to the point that I want to make. Sorry, before I do, I should have said that I was in primary 7 rather than primary 8, of course.

I return to the issue of the public's view on whether there should be a general election. The BBC commissioned a poll by Ipsos MORI at the end of May, and 48 per cent. of respondents said they believed that half or more of MPs are corrupt. Asked whether they trusted MPs to tell the truth, 76 per cent. said that they did not and only 20 per cent. said that they did. The public tend to be more positive about their local MP than they do about MPs in general, which will be a relief to many of us. That was a finding in the BBC survey, but 85 per cent. of those surveyed want an independent judicial body to scrutinise MPs' affairs.

Stephen Pound (Ealing, North) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and also for clarifying the point that confused us about primary 8. Many of us rather suspected that he had been held back for a year.

On the point about statistical evidence and listening on the doorstep, the hon. Gentleman's logic is that people should vote for people as long as they are not MPs, but, if two thirds of the country want to see a massive change, why did two thirds of the country sit on their hands last Thursday?

Angus Robertson: There are many reasons why people voted for all kinds of things. What I pointed out just now was that the overwhelming majority of public opinion is in favour of Parliament's being dissolved. That is one of the important reasons why we should vote for the motion.

Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman has made an interesting point about the difference between how MPs are viewed locally and how the corporate body of politics is viewed nationally. Does he agree that although individual Members of Parliament have earned credibility and support in local communities by working in them, the great malaise to which he refers has come about because there has been a fracture in the relationship of trust between the people who elect us to this body and us as a corporate group?

Does the hon. Gentleman not also feel it is important that we should have a transparent discussion about constitutional change? The Prime Minister of the UK—not the First Minister of Scotland, who is here—alluded to some of that. We have a collective responsibility, beyond even what the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, to try to make sure that we win that trust. That will take a lot of effort.

Angus Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I shall come back to that point shortly; there is a job of work to be done on that important issue.

I return to the BBC survey on public opinion on this important question. Some 62 per cent. of respondents said that they believed MPs put self-interest ahead of the country and their constituents. Only one in five, or 20 per cent., of the public is satisfied with how the Westminster Parliament is doing its job. The figures are damning and if we do not grasp the thorny nettle and deal with the issue, we will have a huge problem.

The recent expenses scandal is the biggest single recent reason for the crisis of confidence, and we should put a lot of effort into getting it sorted. However, it comes after years of House of Commons prevarication and resistance to openness and transparency. *The Daily Telegraph* revelations exposed a totally unacceptable state of affairs.

The public are right to be very angry about the flipping of properties, the avoidance of capital gains tax and the claims for phantom mortgages. They rightly ask how it is that there appears to be one rule for the public and another for MPs who have been caught out. They also ask how a tainted Parliament with tainted Members can find a trusted, credible solution to the crisis.

Of course it was right to do radical, immediate surgery. That has happened in a number of individual cases, and it has been approached by the different political parties that have finally grasped the nettle of transparency. At the recent meeting of party leaders called by Mr. Speaker, I pointed out that our parties have already committed to a higher standard of transparency—namely, that used in the Scottish Parliament. Years ago at Holyrood, the Labour party, the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and others agreed to that better system. I suggested to the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the Liberal Democrats and others that we should simply emulate that system. They agreed and we are now on the right path with the plans that Parliament should publish our claims regularly. In the meantime, many MPs, myself included, have proactively put their details up for public access on our own websites.

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. One would think that he and his colleagues were a race apart in respect of the expenses difficulties that we face in this House. As well as taking the credit for putting his details on his website, will the hon. Gentleman accept some of the responsibility for the situation that we all face as parliamentarians? Also, will he advise the House that the Scottish Parliament had to go through its own expenses trauma before it got to its current situation? That was dealt with under a Labour and Liberal-led Administration.

Angus Robertson: The right hon. Lady is right to suggest that under Presiding Officer George Reid the Scottish Parliament reformed the processes that were used, and all political parties were involved in that process. That was welcome then, and it is welcome now that the lessons have been learned. The record will show her that I have not held any party to be better or worse, in this debate or in any other. If she has evidence to the contrary, she can present it at any stage.

Improving transparency has been the right thing to do, as has agreeing to a series of other measures, including the ending of flipping of second homes and introducing independent scrutiny of all second home claims by all MPs. It is in the public interest, and in the interests of many hard-working and honest parliamentarians in all parts of the House, that this process be accelerated. It is right that we set great store by the Kelly commission, which later this year will give independent recommendations on structural changes in allowances and expenses. It is also right that all party leaders have accepted the principle of an external Parliamentary Standards Authority. That means that regardless of which party is in office, we have a guarantee that the system overseeing MPs' and peers' conduct, including allowances and complaints, will be delegated from Parliament. That is a good thing and a huge step forward.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire, North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says "regardless of which party is in office". Could he give us his valued opinion on which party would win a general election, Labour or the Tories?

Angus Robertson: I think it is up to the public to decide. The hon. Gentleman should be confident that all good MPs have an excellent chance of being re-elected, so no doubt he has nothing to fear from an early general election.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Central Ayrshire) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr. Russell Brown *rose*—

Angus Robertson: I want to make some progress, as I have been generous to Members on both sides of the House.

The case against a general election is completely undermined by the agreements between all the political parties and the tangible progress that has been made.

Mr. Donohoe *rose*—

Angus Robertson: I said that I am going to make progress, so I will.

[Angus Robertson]

After all, the Kelly commission reports in the autumn, the Parliamentary Standards Authority proposal is still at the discussion stage, and all parties are signed up to these structural improvements. There is no reason why we cannot have an election; it would not delay a single thing. We should embrace the opportunity of an historic, reformist election—not the poor second of yet another presentational relaunch of a tired Government. Let us imagine a general election campaign based on the various ideas for democratic reform—the ideas of the Prime Minister and of others, galvanising public interest and support, if that is what there were.

Of course, we in the SNP and Plaid Cymru would argue for decision making closer to home, but we would also make the case for wholesale Westminster reform, such as electoral reform. One can imagine a Parliament properly reflecting the views of the people—with, of course, the necessary safeguards of a minimum electoral hurdle. How about a fully democratic Parliament, ending the grotesque farce of a Second Chamber in the self-styled mother of all Parliaments without any democratic mandate whatsoever? How about fixed-term Parliaments, ending the whip hand of the Executive over the democratic process? How about strengthening Parliament with stronger Committees, the proper scrutiny of legislation, and less curtailment of detailed oversight, ending the travesty of undebated amendments? How about a proper constitution? Those are all exciting ideas, some of which are supported in all parts of the House.

John Robertson (Glasgow, North-West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is most gracious. Can I assume from what he has said that he will be supporting the Prime Minister in his plans to reorganise Parliament and to give more to the ordinary people? It would be nice to see him do that because our problem with him, as he knows, is that he is always voting with the Conservatives, and never with any other party.

Angus Robertson: This is a good stage at which to put on record the fact that halfway through the debate I will have to leave to meet the Secretary of State for Justice to discuss the Parliamentary Standards Authority, because there is all-party involvement in moving these proposals forward. No doubt some or most of those proposals would find support from other parties. Whichever party wins can then take them forward, and the reform process will have a mandate.

The second argument that I have been hearing in opposition to a democratic election is that, because of the economic crisis, we somehow cannot let the public decide. If that is the case, how is it that the world's largest democracy, India, has managed a general election in recent months? How has the world's biggest economy, the United States, managed through an economic crisis with the historic election of Barack Obama, and how has the country with the closest parliamentary system to the UK's, Canada, similarly managed a general election in the middle of testing economic times? The list goes on and on. The argument against having a general election in testing economic times is just not credible.

It is true to say, however, that we need an election to rebuild confidence in UK economic policy. Not only have this Government taken no responsibility for their role in our economic difficulties, but they are overseeing a catastrophic rise in unemployment. More than 200,000 people have been thrown on the dole in the past three months, and there is a forecast balance of payments deficit of £93 billion and a national debt expected to reach £1.6 trillion.

Stephen Pound: The hon. Gentleman is well liked in the House, and he is showing his customary charm, but may I say to him, first, that the United States and India have fixed-term Parliaments, so there is not a direct read-across? Secondly, at the risk of sounding like an over-anxious primary age child, I say to him that when the expression "mother of Parliaments" was first used in this very Chamber by John Bright, it referred specifically to England, not to Parliament. That may not sit comfortably with the hon. Gentleman, but it is accurate.

Angus Robertson: I am grateful for the history lesson, and we will be glad to return this Chamber to the good people of England so that it is their Parliament, while we make better decisions at home in Scotland. I see next to the hon. Gentleman his colleague from the Social Democratic and Labour party, the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), who no doubt would also like to see a united Ireland making decisions for itself and no Northern Irish Members in this Chamber, but that is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland to decide on.

Lembit Öpik *rose—*

Angus Robertson: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I want to allow other Members to take part in this important debate.

I return to the current economic challenges. It is of immense concern that under Labour, we now have a debt of more than £60,000 for every household in the UK. I remember election leaflets being put around stating, "Don't vote SNP, it'll cost every family £5,000." Was it in the 1999 election campaign? [Hon. Members: "It was 2007."] Oh, it was as recent as 2007. My goodness, how much more expensive it has been. There is now a £60,000 price tag for Labour's mismanagement of our economy.

Of course, we have a Government, a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who dithered and delayed over Northern Rock, taking five months from the start of the run before eventually nationalising the bank.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Angus Robertson: I have already signalled that I want to make progress to allow other Members to get in. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make a speech, no doubt he will attempt to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We have a Government who delayed when the banking crisis started, refusing to guarantee sterling deposits across the banking system, and who took a year to get a banking Act on the statute book, but who even now have not introduced changes to the very banking regulations that led to many of the problems in the first place. We have a Government who failed to understand the impact on the poorest when they abolished the 10p rate of tax, who failed to act to temper the rise of fuel prices and whose VAT cut protected less than half the jobs that direct capital investment would have protected.

That last point is vital. While the Prime Minister talks the talk of fiscal stimulus, he has failed to walk the walk. While President Obama is delivering a real fiscal stimulus—a state such as Maryland, which is the same size as Scotland and larger than Wales, will have £2 billion of extra resources to spend in 2010—this Government are planning to cut £1 billion from the Scottish budget. *[Interruption.]* They are cutting £1 billion from public spending in Scotland and directly threatening 9,000 jobs. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. May we conduct this debate in an orderly manner, please?

Angus Robertson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In truth, the Government's case against an election has nothing to do with the need to pursue parliamentary reform or manage the economy. It is pure, naked self-preservation in the wake of the worst electoral showing by the Labour party in 90 years.

Labour Members of Parliament have been told by Government Whips that a vote for the motion or an abstention means the end of their careers. That is perhaps understandable for many in Scotland, where the SNP, a mid-term party of Government, were up 10 points on the last European elections, while the Labour party slumped and votes for the Tories, Liberal Democrats and the UK irrelevance party went down. The SNP won the Chancellor of the Exchequer's seat while Labour came third in the seat held by the Secretary of State for Scotland. The SNP won two thirds of all local authority areas in the country, including Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee, Stirling, North Ayrshire, South Lanarkshire—the list goes on. Perhaps Lord Mandelson has been right to back the Prime Minister; after all, the latest polls show that it does not matter who is in charge of the Labour party. Today's ComRes poll shows that in Scotland the SNP would win an election against Labour, regardless of who is in charge.

However, such partisan considerations should come second in the context of a profound crisis in democracy. We should all put trust in democracy before our own party interests. I therefore conclude with some words of cross-party consensus from another Member about the need to restore trust in politics. He said earlier today: "In the midst of all the rancour and recriminations…let us seize the moment to lift our politics to a higher standard. In the midst of doubt, let us revive confidence. Let us also stand together because on this, at least, I think we all agree—Britain deserves a political system equal to the hopes and character of our people. Let us differ on policy—that is inevitable—but let us stand together for integrity and democracy. That is now more essential than ever". The Prime Minister's fine words were correct, but they lacked the delivery mechanism, which is holding a general election. That is why we must dissolve Parliament and hold a general election. I commend the motion to the House.

4.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): I thank the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) for praising the Prime Minister—we can do much more of that in the debate. I also thank the leader of Plaid Cymru for his earlier welcome of my reinstatement as Secretary of State—I am grateful. I apologise to him and the House for having to rush off after I have spoken to get my seals of office. I have to stand the hon. Gentleman up for the Queen.

I shall respond to the hon. Member for Moray shortly and urge hon. Members to reject the motion, which calls for a dissolution of Parliament. However, first, I want to ask why the motion is not in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. He calls for an immediate general election every time he gets out of bed and every time he goes on television. He has said virtually nothing for the past few weeks, except to demand an early election. So why does not he table the motion instead of trooping dutifully behind the nationalists? Is he just playing to the media gallery, as usual, because he knows that the House of Commons will not back him? Is it a case of bravery before the cameras, cowardice before Parliament?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will reconsider and withdraw that remark.

Mr. Hain: I happily do so—it was said in jest.

The leader of the Conservative party is allowing the nationalists to do his work for him.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition has followed the example of the Prime Minister. We have a debate in which the Prime Minister could have explained why he does not want an election, yet he has not bothered to turn up. He has sent a Minister who is not available for the whole debate. When we have a three-hour debate in the Chamber, the least the Government can do is find a Minister who can be here for it.

Mr. Hain: Where is the leader of the Liberal Democrats? Where is the leader of the Conservative party? I see that the leader of the SNP has dutifully travelled down to do the Tories' work for them, as he so often does.

Plaid Cymru and the SNP are the Tories' little helpers. In 1979, the SNP voted to destroy a Labour Government and usher in 18 years of miserable Tory rule. In the European elections, voting Plaid Cymru allowed the Tories to top the poll in Wales—albeit on a pitiful vote of just over 6 per cent. of the electorate. Voting SNP will allow the Tories to get in at Westminster.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): Not that it matters a great deal—although the right hon. Gentleman has apologised once to the House, a few seconds ago—but just to be accurate, he said that Plaid Cymru voted to bring down the Labour Government. We did not.

Mr. Hain: Actually, I did not say that at all. I said that the SNP voted with the Tories to bring down the Government in 1979. However, let me remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that we remember well that Plaid Cymru came to the rescue of the besieged Conservative Government under John Major, by doing a grubby deal in 1993.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford) (Con): Talking about grubby deals, does the right hon. Gentleman remember that in 1979 the Labour Government did a grubby deal with Plaid Cymru to secure their votes and to try to cling to office?

Mr. Hain: Actually, it was an honourable deal, concerning quarrymen in north Wales as I recall. We were happy to do what we did, which was in their interests.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Hain: In a moment. The SNP—the hon. Gentleman's party—has a history of seeking to inflict a Tory Government on Scotland. It did that in 1979 and it is trying to do it again now. The SNP's real agenda is not about an election; it is about wanting to get a Tory Government in Britain to undermine Scotland's link with the rest of Britain. The SNP would love to have a Tory Government in Westminster, inflicting mass unemployment, education cuts and hospital closures in Scotland again, so that it could try to ride a wave of revulsion towards independence for Scotland.

Pete Wishart: I agree with the Secretary of State: the last thing that Scotland needs is a Conservative Government. We remember all too well the scorched earth policies and being the testing ground for the poll tax, but does he not agree that the reason that we will get a Conservative Government in Scotland is the failure and futility of his Labour Government?

Mr. Hain: Is the hon. Gentleman saying, then, that he prefers a Labour Government? *[Interruption.]* That is very interesting. So, as far as he is concerned, he does not mind a Conservative Government in Westminster.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hain: Let me make some progress. We now have the hon. Gentleman on the record as being indifferent to a Tory Government, and the people of Scotland will note that.

People who back the nationalists get the Tories on their coat tails, just as the Tories are on the nationalists' coat tails in voting for today's motion. That is what the nationalists are: tartan Tories in Scotland and daffodil Tories in Westminster.

Hywel Williams (Caernarfon) (PC) *rose—*

Mr. Hain: I give way to a daffodil Tory in Westminster.

Hywel Williams: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way, but we need to respect history. We had Tory Governments throughout the '80s and '90s not because of the actions of the nationalist parties, but because the Labour party lost the election—and then lost and lost and lost. That is the Labour party's responsibility, not ours.

Mr. Hain: I have a lot of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but it was his nationalist colleagues in Scotland who helped to bring down the Labour Government, which paved the way for a Tory Government.

Mr. Jim McGovern (Dundee, West) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State's comments about what happened in 1979. The people of Scotland have good memories and they will never forgive the separatists of the SNP for what happened in 1979, which was an unmitigated disaster for the people of Scotland. I am sure that the Secretary of State will remember that, following 1979, the SNP—the separatists—were dubbed the tartan Tories by the people of Scotland. Is he also aware that, given that the official Opposition are totally devoid of any policies at the moment, the people of Scotland currently dub the separatists of the SNP the political wing of the Conservative and Unionist party?

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend puts the case very eloquently, and I have to agree with him. Here are the tartan Tories, at it again today, siding with the Conservatives to achieve their objectives. People who back the nationalists get the Tories on their coat tails.

Adam Price (Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr) (PC): How can the Secretary of State have the gall to accuse our parties of being Tories when on virtually every major issue of the past 12 years—whether the Iraq war or the privatisation of Royal Mail—our parties have been to the left of his?

Mr. Hain: What about the minimum wage—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Members have a right to be heard.

Mr. Hain: What about the statutory minimum wage? I do not remember massive support for that from the nationalists.

To dissolve Parliament now would be to walk away from the necessity for the reform that voters are demanding, as the hon. Member for Moray rightly said, and that we are delivering in the form set out by the Prime Minister earlier today. I heard the hon. Gentleman waxing lyrical—and being very persuasive—about the need for democratic reform. Virtually every one of the proposals that he advocated was enunciated from this Dispatch Box by the Prime Minister a few hours ago.

To dissolve Parliament now would be to turn our backs on the British people in their time of economic need and insecurity. Neither of the two great challenges that we face—the political challenge and the economic challenge—would be solved by an election. Playing with parliamentary motions might be a priority for Opposition parties. Cleaning up politics and getting the country back to work is Labour's priority.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does the Secretary of State not believe that a Labour victory in a general election would clearly reinforce the strength and competence of the Government to address the issues that confront this nation? Is that not a case for holding an election now?

Mr. Hain: When the time comes to call an election, we will indeed get a renewed mandate to take the country forward and to meet the challenges of the future. That will be the choice that is put before the British people at that point. They would not forgive us, however, for abandoning the job of implementing parliamentary reform and economic recovery now. They want the Government to sort things out; they want us to do it quickly, and then, and only then, to call a general election. There will be one soon enough—within a

year—and only then will it be right to go to the country and ask who should take us forward to the future, once we have addressed the pressing concerns of today.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee, East) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that these things need to be done quickly, and I entirely agree with him. So why, after 12 years, have we still not got a fully elected House of Lords and a proper democratic system for this Chamber? This is expediency on the part of the Government; they are not taking decisive action. Their argument is facile beyond belief.

Mr. Hain: The reason that we have not been able to get our reform through the House of Lords is that the House of Lords blocked it. Labour has only about 30 per cent. of the votes in the House of Lords, and the Conservative party—despite now advocating a policy of an elected second Chamber—cannot deliver its own peers in the House of Lords in such a vote. Sooner rather than later, however, we will put that question to the House of Lords, and we will hope to carry the House with us in getting full reform for a democratic second Chamber.

Meanwhile, there is a lot to do. Of course the European elections were terrible for the Labour party. But, far more significantly, they were an alarm call for all the parties, and for parliamentary democracy itself. For every party, a low turnout at elections is the clearest sign that the British people are not engaged with the political process. That is our fault, not theirs. We seem obsessed with procedure and tribal party politics—as we can see this afternoon—and now the public also think that MPs are all in it for our own ends.

If this motion were carried and Parliament were dissolved, all that the poll would amount to would be another referendum on MPs' expenses. The low turnout and the rising support for fringe and extreme parties show us one thing: that people used their vote last Thursday to protest, not on the finer points of European policy, but on the story of the day—indeed, the story of every single one of the past 30 days: MPs' expenses.

Mr. Dunne: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way on a point on which the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) would not give way. I want to ask my right hon. Friend a simple question. Does he honestly believe that, if the motion were successful and there were to be a general election in the coming weeks, the question of Members' expenses would go away? Would it not stay with us for the following four years as well? Would not *The Daily Telegraph* and all the other newspapers revisit the issue and find some other reason to print the same story?

Mr. Hain: I could not agree more, which is why we need to lance the boil now, and why we need this Parliament, on a cross-party basis, to sort this out here and now. Then, within a year, we can have an election to decide who should take the country forward—not how we should reform parliamentary expenses, because that will have been done, but who should take us forward to meet the big challenges of the global economic crisis, of climate change and all the other issues before us.

Lembit Öpik: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that what has effectively happened, in summary, is that the general public and the media have become obsessed with the process of politics rather than the outcomes that we are meant to create, part of which is our own fault? The people of Montgomeryshire are less interested in process than in getting out of this recession, so if we are not to have an election, will he explain how he envisages the Government responding in the months ahead to the need of the citizens of Montgomeryshire and across the country for outcomes to make their lives better, their jobs more secure and to reduce the sort of social tensions that led to the reaction we saw in the European elections last week?

Mr. Hain: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman that the media are far too obsessed, almost to the exclusion of all else, with process. It is process, process, process rather than substance, substance, substance. That is why we will carry on with delivering our policies to get the housing market going again, to build more social housing, to tackle the lack of confidence in business and to ensure that business is supported so that we can recover from this economic crisis brought about by the global financial collapse and move the country forward. Then there will be a choice—a very clear choice—at the next general election.

We do not need a referendum on expenses because we have just had one. We were all given a real kicking by the voters and we understand the message: "Clean up, shape up, get on with the business of Government and come back to us when the problem is fixed". Where the Opposition parties posture, we deliver. We are determined to take the necessary action, not to walk away.

Just imagine what might happen to the economy if Parliament were dissolved and we had an election. In the middle of probably the worst financial crisis the world has faced in living memory, Britain would face weeks and weeks of instability and uncertainty—just when there are reports of rising consumer confidence, just when business surveys show the pace of decline is slowing, just when mortgage approvals have risen for the third month in a row and just when the poison infecting our banks has been stemmed. Why, just at this critical moment when the global economy is still volatile, do the nationalists want to trigger instability in the markets and in the British economy?

Let us imagine for a moment pursuing this nationalist-Tory alternative. We dissolve Parliament, then spend the next three weeks fighting each other rather than the global crisis, and the nationalists do not have a clue what to do about it. The hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price), who rather fancies himself as an economist, praised Iceland as an inspirational model. No sooner had he done so than its economy imploded, while his other small country model, Ireland, has sadly had its own serious difficulties, yet Plaid lauded both Iceland and Ireland as an arc of prosperity.

As for the Tories, the real reason they want an election now is that they cannot go on for ever dodging the questions. They have no policies at all except for multi-billion pound cuts in public investment.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hain: I will give way in a few moments.

It is good to see that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) has found time from his millionaire speaking and consultancy contracts to be

[Mr. Hain]

with us today. He has a vivacious Welsh wife, but sadly she has not managed to educate him politically. He opposed the minimum wage, which has benefited millions of workers throughout Britain. He opposed the social chapter, referring to

"minimum wages, social chapters and all the other job-destroying nonsense".—[*Official Report*, 20 January 1997; Vol. 288, c. 606.]

He said that the National Assembly for Wales would be

"nothing more than a talking shop and a terrible waste of money".

Does he still hold those views? Should he not now apologise to the shadow Welsh Secretary for landing her right in it?

When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State for Wales, at least he learned the national anthem—indeed, his rehearsing it led to him marrying his private secretary—but he blocked billions of pounds of objective 1 and convergence funding for Wales, which a Labour Government subsequently delivered. He is now part of an Opposition who want to implement billion-pound cuts that would decimate those very European programmes right across Wales.

Adam Price: The Secretary of State's speech is another good argument for an early dissolution. He is obviously out of practice. If Plaid Cymru has nothing to contribute in terms of the economic crisis, why did his party agree to form a coalition with us, and why is the leader of my party, the Minister for the Economy and Transport, coming up with the ProAct wage subsidy scheme, which the Secretary of State has himself praised and described as an innovative scheme that should be copied here?

Mr. Hain: If we are talking politics and government in Cardiff Bay as opposed to politics and government in the House of Commons, why did the hon. Gentleman's party chase after the Conservatives in the desperate search for a coalition before Labour helped it out and got it into government?

On the "Today" programme this morning, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), the shadow Secretary of State for Health, let slip that

"that does mean over three years after 2011 a 10 per cent. reduction in the departmental expenditure limits for other departments. It is a very tough spending requirement."

Yes, the demand from the Tories is very tough. A 10 per cent. cut would be an utter disaster for housing policing, business support, defence and many other public services. A 10 per cent. cut would amount to cuts of £50 billion across the United Kingdom, £600 million in Wales, and £1.2 billion in Scotland.

The Tory mask is slipping. The Tories want people to vote soon, before the truth is out. They have no positive solutions to the financial crisis, just opportunist spin on the economy today followed by savage cuts to public services tomorrow—cuts made almost with relish, gleefully. The Tories would use the financial crisis as an excuse to do what they have always wanted to do: cut, cut and cut again.

Stewart Hosie: The Secretary of State is absolutely right: making savage cuts in the teeth of a recession is the wrong thing to do. He will therefore criticise his own Chancellor and the Treasury for the £500 million worth of cuts that will be heading Scotland's way next year in the teeth of a recession.

Mr. Hain: Is this not curious? The Scottish Government have never had more money than they have now. Their budget, like that of the Welsh Assembly Government, has more than doubled since we came to power in 1997.

What is the real nationalist agenda? Why would the nationalists dissolve this Parliament today? It would not just be for the purpose of an immediate election; they would dissolve this Parliament for ever. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!" There we are. They are cheering the idea. If they were frank, they would admit that they would break up the United Kingdom, cutting off Wales and Scotland from the main markets, population centres, wealth and international influence of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): He is talking sense at last.

Mr. Hain: That is the sense that the people of Scotland will reject: cutting Scotland's links with the United Kingdom, just as Plaid Cymru would cut Wales off from the great benefits of sheltering under the umbrella of the United Kingdom and making us all stronger together.

Mr. Salmond: Given that the Secretary of State's colleagues in the Labour party in Scotland have been deploying these arguments for years—and, I am sure, deployed them in the European election campaign—to what does he attribute the judgment of the people of Scotland in increasing the SNP vote by 10 per cent. in mid-term, and last week's resounding endorsement of the SNP Government in Scotland?

Mr. Hain: The right hon. Gentleman speaks of a resounding endorsement, but I believe that the SNP received less than a third of the vote on a tiny turnout. Labour voters, for reasons that I have explained, stayed at home in their hundreds of thousands.

Mrs. Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that people listening to this debate will be appalled by the petty discussions about which party's votes have increased by what percentage? What concerns the people of this country, and certainly the people of Wales—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Moon: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

What concerns the people of Wales and the people of this country is the memory of being told to get on their bikes and find work—of "hunt the job". They remember money being sent from Wales to Westminster when it could have been invested in Wales. They remember schools falling apart, and education waiting lists. That is what people want us to discuss here, not whether another party has increased its voting share by 1 per cent. Nobody cares about that; they care about their lives.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend makes that point extremely persuasively, and it reminds me that when the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks was Secretary of State for Wales he endorsed the policy of his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), in

sending money back from Wales to the Treasury, which we then had to reverse by more than doubling the budget for Wales since we came to power. If the nationalists were successful in wrenching Wales and Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom, that would leave Wales with a £9 billion deficit in public finances, and the figure for Scotland would be about £10 billion.

The SNP Administration at Holyrood are propped up by the Tories. Tory votes in the Scottish Parliament supported the SNP's budget of cuts, and the quid pro quo is that the SNP in Westminster does the Tories' bidding. People in Scotland whose communities still bear the scars of Thatcherism did not thank the SNP in 1979, and they will not do so now.

Let me make this plain: the Tories and the nationalists would turn their backs on the British people and walk away together. They would dissolve this Parliament because they hope it would suit their short-term political ends. Only Labour will stay the course to do the hard work, to reform, and to give real help to the British people. They can dissolve if they want to; this Government are not for dissolving. We are standing firm, and I urge the House to reject the motion.

4.52 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State for Wales; to hold that office is one of the greatest honours that life can bring, and to hold it twice is a piece of great good fortune. He said that I had in the past somehow landed the current shadow Welsh Secretary in it, but I can assure him that, the Conservatives having won in Wales for the first time in 90 years, she does not feel very "landed in it" at the moment. He should hope to be landed in it in a similar way in future elections. Such a description was therefore not very appropriate, and nor was deriding any other party for getting about a third of the vote when there was no region or nation of the United Kingdom in which his Government received a third of the vote last week, only two in which they received a quarter of the vote, some in which they did not get a fifth of the vote, and some in which the governing party of this country did not get a tenth of the vote.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) on moving the motion, which, it will be no surprise to discover, the official Opposition can readily support. The crux of the question is simple. By common consent across all parts of the House, our country faces enormous challenges. Members of all parties are familiar with them: the challenge of restoring the health of an economy battered by recession and high debt levels; the ever-present challenge of improving public services; the challenge of reducing violent crime and of improving national security at a time of international terrorism; and the challenge of restoring faith in our political system after scandals and revelations that have hit this House hard, and rebuilding respect and confidence in our democracy itself.

The question before us is whether these tasks and challenges are best faced for the next 10 or 11 months by the current Parliament, now in its twilight year, with a large and growing number of right hon. and hon. Members leaving its ranks, burdened with a serious loss of its reputation, with a minimal and diminishing opportunity to pass fresh legislation, with many decisions on hold and with a visibly divided Government, or whether they are better faced by a new Parliament, with new Members and renewed energy, with the expectation of several years of work before it, with a mandate approved by the people of the country, and with the authority that comes from demonstrable popular approval in a democracy—something that the current Government have forfeited and the Government of the current Prime Minister have neither sought nor ever received. One only has to ask the question to see that to most people in this country there is a clear and emphatic answer.

The Prime Minister's statement to the House earlier was peppered with references to legitimacy, accountability, democracy and engagement, but it never seems to occur to him that one way to bring about those characteristics for any Government is to consult the 44 million voters of this country and let them have their say. He has set up a national democratic renewal council, which turns out to be a Cabinet committee behind closed doors with a title so risible in its grandiose pomposity that it shows a complete lack of self-awareness of the ridicule with which the nation views the Government.

How can we inject vigour, energy and freshness into political debate better than by consulting the people of the country? It is apparent beyond argument that the majority of the people, who are genuinely no fans of holding elections unnecessarily, believe that they now have the right to give their own verdict. Every survey shows it, and every time any of us walk down the street we hear it. Some people feel let down by their elected representatives and wish to have their say. Many can sense, with the sure instinct of the British people, that a crucial decision point is coming and that there is no reason to delay.

Perhaps even more have been watching a bitter battle take place within the governing party about whether one unelected Prime Minister should be replaced with another one. It is not surprising that they should feel that the question of who leads our country is not the private preserve of a dysfunctional Government at the tail end of a Parliament, but a matter for the collective judgment of the nation.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is a considerable historian. Can he tell us of just one historical occasion on which a Government with a secure majority have called a general election simply because the Opposition have asked for one?

Mr. Hague: There are many cases in history when Governments have called general elections because they wish to seek a mandate for whatever policies they were putting to the country long before the expiry of a Parliament—*[Interruption.]* I refer the hon. Gentleman to Baldwin in 1923, before the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), says that it was not a Tory Government. Indeed, many Governments in the 1950s and the 1980s sought re-election before the end of the Parliament, and on some of those occasions, the Opposition were asking for an election—certainly they were in 1923. If the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) has any further historical inquiries, I hope that he will make them.

[Mr. Hague]

While the question of the dissolution of Parliament cannot simply be settled by reference to public demand, it has to be accepted by any commentator or participant in our politics that the current circumstances of this Parliament, already in its final year, are without precedent in modern times. Not only is public faith in this House at its lowest possibly at any time since the late 18th century and the mail franking scandal—a historical reference for the hon. Gentleman—but public support for the Government is, by reference to any of the widespread elections held last week, the lowest by some distance for any incumbent Government at any point in our modern democratic history. Such a combination means that this Parliament lacks the authority to embark on new and substantial programmes of policy or reform, even if it had time or if the Government had the energy, purpose or vision.

Vision, of course, was the crucial ingredient promised by the Prime Minister when he suddenly called off the general election planned in the autumn of 2007. He said that he would not call an election so that he could set out his vision. Curiously, he then forgot to do so. Indeed, the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble)—a former Labour Minister—has pointed that out. In her letter last week, she wrote that

"the vision has not materialised."

She added that the people

"look to the government for high quality public services, and a sense of purpose and direction for the country. The prime minister has to articulate that and, sadly, it hasn't happened."

That is what Labour Members think.

Then the reason not to have an election was to set out the vision. Now the reason memorably given by the Prime Minister in his interview a month ago on GMTV is that an election would cause chaos. That revealing insight into the bunker-like mentality of No. 10 Downing street is a further argument that the people in the country should have their say. The Prime Minister feared chaos at the ballot box, presumably in place of the well-ordered conduct of government that we have witnessed in recent weeks. The Home Secretary resigned on Tuesday, the Communities and Local Government Secretary on Wednesday, and the Work and Pensions Secretary on Thursday. Downing street worked for 48 hours, through the night, to save the Prime Minister from being overthrown by his Cabinet. What a relief it is that there was no chaos in this country in the last couple of weeks.

The argument against holding an election on the grounds of chaos possesses three shattering weaknesses. First, it can presumably be used at any time and could be used to justify never asking the people to go to the polls for fear of the chaotic consequences that they might haplessly bring down on themselves. It is an argument of which Ceausescu would have been proud, as he pathetically waved from the balcony at the tens of thousands who had come to remove him.

Secondly, such an argument shows a patronising misreading of the people of this country, who have never in recent times produced chaotic scenes in a general election and have seldom produced a chaotic result. The Prime Minister can rest assured that they will go about their democratic duty when they get the chance without any trace of chaos, but with a quiet and determined efficiency.

Thirdly, it is a comment that says little for those countries that have recently had a full-scale general election, even in the midst of a world economic recession. The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Stephen Pound) pointed out that some of them had fixed-term Parliaments, but they still managed to conduct their elections in the middle of that recession. They include among their number no less a country than India, the world's largest and most complex democracy, where a respected Government won the authority and increased freedom of manoeuvre that came from a renewal of their mandate. The United States of America is the world's most powerful democracy, in which elections produced a renewal and reinvigoration of national leadership on an utterly historic scale. The people of India and America managed to have their elections in a perfectly orderly way, and after campaigns that were far longer than a general election campaign in this country, but the Prime Minister believes that an election in this country—from which those countries derive so many of their proud democratic traditions—would be impossibly chaotic. What does that say about his view of Britain and the British people? It is yet further proof that he is incapable of trusting the people of Britain.

To be fair to the Secretary of State, his loyalty to the Prime Minister does not extend to adopting the nonsensical arguments against an election employed by the Prime Minister. The gist of the Secretary of State's argument was that Parliament has important work to do and that on parliamentary standards and the economy, only this Parliament can clear up its own mess. That, of course, is not remotely true. In each case, the decisions that are to be made are so serious and public approval for them so essential that they would be far better carried out after all the debate, explanation, discussion and transparency that only a general election can bring.

The Government's argument is that it is impossible to interrupt proceedings for even a month for a general election, but that we can interrupt them for nearly three months for the summer recess. If Parliament is engaged in such important work at the moment, why is there so little business before the House of Commons this month? Why have a last Session of Parliament, beginning this autumn, that can be only a few months in length? If we work it out, we see that perhaps a maximum of 14 weeks might be available in which legislation can be considered. What has happened to the important legislation that was going through Parliament in this Session, some of which has mysteriously disappeared—namely, the Bill to allow part-privatisation of the Royal Mail?

Lord Mandelson, whom I believe we must now deferentially refer to as the First Secretary of State, has said of the Postal Services Bill:

"It would be irresponsible of the Government to allow delays to the...measures needed to reform Royal Mail and secure the future of the universal postal service...Any delay would merely serve to threaten the sustainability of the network."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 May 2009; Vol. 710, c. 848.]

The Government's case against the dissolution of Parliament would be much stronger if they even knew whether and when they want to proceed with a measure that they have said can stand no delay and that is meant to be before Parliament now.

In mentioning Lord Mandelson, I did not mean to send a chill down the spine of Ministers, but it is now impossible to discuss the operation of government or Parliament without reference to his opinions. The unelected Prime Minister has managed to produce the most powerful unelected deputy since Henry VIII appointed Cardinal Wolsey—except that Cardinal Wolsey was more sensitive in his handling of colleagues than the noble Lord Mandelson is. His personal retinue of 11 Ministers, six of whom attend on him in the House of Lords, is the largest in the Government. The growth of the unelected portion of Her Majesty's Government is further evidence of the need for the dissolution of Parliament. We also need the fresh air of electoral competition to blow through the dark recesses of several Departments.

The Prime Minister who lectures us all on democratic renewal is appointing peers to positions of power on a scale unknown for decades. There are now more peers attending the Cabinet than at any time since the days of Harold Macmillan. Half the Ministers in the Foreign Office now sit in the House of Lords or are about to do so, including no less a figure than the new Minister for Europe. So after years in which hon. Members in all parts of the House have called for better democratic scrutiny of EU decision making, we have arrived at a situation where elected Members of Parliament will be unable to question the Minister for Europe at all and where, a week before an important EU summit, the Minister is not available to either House of Parliament. That is not democratic renewal, but democratic reversal by the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister who told us today about the importance of accountability and legitimacy has just managed to appoint an enterprise tsar in Sir Alan Sugar, but no one seems to know whether he will have Government machinery reporting to him. Apparently, moreover, he, too, cannot be questioned in either House of Parliament at all.

The Lord Mandelson, denied the opportunity to become Foreign Secretary by the sad combination of a Prime Minister too weak to remove his Foreign Secretary and, equally, a Foreign Secretary too weak to challenge the Prime Minister, has gone around instead collecting titles and even whole Departments to add to his name. His title now adds up to, "The right hon. the Baron Mandelson of Foy in the county of Herefordshire and Hartlepool in the county of Durham, First Secretary of State, Lord President of the Privy Council and Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills". It would be no surprise to wake up in the morning and find that he had become an archbishop—*[Laughter]*. That is exactly what happened with Cardinal Wolsey.

We are left with a Government held together solely by fear. The Prime Minister is unable to remove Ministers in whom he has lost faith, for fear that they will quit altogether; Ministers are unwilling to challenge a Prime Minister in whom they have lost faith, for fear that they will no longer be Ministers; Labour Back Benchers are unwilling to remove a Prime Minister in whom they have certainly lost faith, for fear of having to have an election—and all of them are living in fear of one Minister with a very long title for whom, at the last election, no one in the country ever voted at all.

That is the situation. The Government are locked together in an embrace of mutual terror and diminished legitimacy, but their refusal to face the voters can no longer be defended. There comes a point when democratic renewal is indeed necessary, and the country knows and understands that that is now.

The Prime Minister has made a statement today on constitutional reform in an effort to justify his continuation in office. Leave aside the transparent desperation and sheer unadulterated cynicism of looking to a referendum on voting reform only when he has seemingly lost hope of retaining power under the voting rules prevailing today, the fact that the referendum on the European constitution that he promised in the last general election manifesto has never been held at all and the fact that progress on House of Lords reform has been stymied by indecision or indifference during his term of office so far, whatever the history of these proposals and whatever their merits, a Prime Minister at this stage of a Parliament can command the real authority to implement such changes only by including them in a general election manifesto and asking the country to approve them. But the Prime Minister's objective is not to strengthen constitutional change by winning a mandate for it in a general election. Instead, it is to avert a general election by coming up with proposals for constitutional change—the exact reverse of true democratic accountability and legitimacy in government.

No set of proposals can now overcome the fact that this is a Parliament that has lost its moral authority, and that the Government derived from that Parliament have lost the unity, authority and confidence to govern in the national interest. The events of the last eight days, in which 11 Ministers have resigned from the Government, have summed up for most voters the sense of decay and division that makes them want to be consulted about the future.

The words of resigning Ministers speak for themselves—they require no embellishment by the Opposition. The right hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy) said:

"I have been unhappy about smears against colleagues, the undermining of colleagues and friends by No. 10".

The right hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (James Purnell) said to the Prime Minister:

"I am calling on you to stand aside to give our party a fighting chance of winning".

The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said:

"Several of the women attending Cabinet ...have been treated by you as little more than female window dressing...you have strained every sinew of...loyalty".

The hon. Member for Northampton, North, whom I cited earlier, has said that

"the person at the top has to forge a group of strong politicians into a united, coherent team to provide stable government. And that has, painfully, not happened either."

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said:

"Even I didn't think a Brown administration would be as inept as this one".

The quotes go on, and they come from Labour Members. It is not necessary to read them all out—it is almost impossible to do so in the time available. It is impossible to recall, even from the dark and dying days of other Administrations, such condemnation of a Government from within their own ranks.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr. Hague: I have almost concluded, but we must have the entertainment of listening to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. MacShane: I am deeply grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, whose family of course come from my constituency. He can tell wonderful jokes about Lord Mandelson—I wish he could tell more, because we all love laughing at them—but what is the point of this speech? Why have the Opposition not tabled this motion? Why are they coming in on the coat tails of the Scottish nationalists?

Mr. Hague: First, I think that the right hon. Gentleman was not just laughing at my joke about Lord Mandelson; he was laughing with it. That is sad news for him, because it means what has in fact already been reflected in the reshuffle: however desperate the Government have been to find new Ministers, they have sadly not turned to him. That is most unfortunate.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr. Hague: I am not going to give way any more, because I am nearly at the end of my speech. [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on!"] Well, the hon. Lady is so charming that I shall do so.

Mrs. Williams: I was worried for a moment that the right hon. Gentleman was afraid of the Member for Conwy. I have sat quietly listening to his speech. I was not going to stand up, but then he said that he was coming to the end of it. All I have heard for the past 15 minutes or so is character assassination; I have heard nothing at all about policies. I also listened to the chorus of the boys' club on the Opposition Benches without hearing a single word about policies and why we should call a general election. Does he agree with the boys' club chorus from the nationalists? If we call a general election and there is a change of Government, do they think that Wales and Scotland will be immune from the global economic situation in which the UK finds itself? Could he comment on that single policy?

Mr. Hague: I assure the hon. Lady that I am not afraid of any lady from Wales except my mother-in-law, so she need not worry about that. Secondly, I have not indulged in any character assassination; Lord Mandelson will be most flattered by what I have said about him today—I am simply helping to build him up. Thirdly, both the hon. Member for Moray and I have made the strong and serious case that national democratic renewal—the phrase that constantly trips from the tongue of the Prime Minister—can be achieved only by the renewal of a mandate or the renewal of an authority of Parliament across the range of policies in order to deal with the challenges of the world and national economic situation, of trying to improve public services and of safeguarding national security. It has been the burden of my case from the beginning of my remarks that dealing with those things effectively requires a Parliament with the energy and new authority from the people to carry out whichever policies the people of this country wish to follow.

So as the Prime Minister presides over his national democratic renewal council, let him reflect that the answer to this country's problems and the unprecedented contempt in which our politics is held cannot lie in another committee led by him. If committees led by the Prime Minister did any good, the country would not be in this mess and the Labour party would not be at its most unpopular since the first world war. What this country needs is a real democratic renewal in which every one of its citizens can take part; a committee with the broadest membership possible—one to include the entire nation; and a long-established tradition called a general election. Such an election is open to all, everyone in the country gets to have their say and at the end of the process our democracy is strengthened and renewed. That is what the country wants, that is what our democracy needs and that is why we will vote this evening for the motion calling for this Parliament to be dissolved and the people of Britain to decide their own future.

5.15 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase) (Lab): In the first part of the debate, I thought that I had intruded on some sort of private feud. It has now become much more fun, and I hugely enjoyed the speech made by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). I shall be brief, and I am sorry to inject a note of realism into our proceedings. I tried to do so when I asked the right hon. Gentleman whether he could tell me of all the occasions on which Governments had called elections because Oppositions had asked for them. Of course, there have been no such occasions.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con) *rose*—

Dr. Wright: I will not give way for the moment, although I shall do so later.

There are two problems with what is proposed. One is that it is dishonest, and the other is that it is dangerous. I am sorry to be rather serious about the matter, but I want to be serious. The proposal is dishonest because the proposers of the motion know that what they request will not happen. It is dishonest because it is part of the game that we play, and the game that we play contributes greatly to the regard in which we are held outside this place.

There is a constitutional illiteracy even in believing that if a party changes its leader between elections, there should be an election. We do not have a presidential system; we have a party system in which parties present themselves to the electorate periodically. Some of the arguments that we have heard in recent times have been preposterous. The fact is that Governments with secure majorities do not call elections other than when they want to.

Dr. Lewis: I seem to remember that in both 1983 and 1987 Governments with healthy Conservative majorities called an election a year earlier than they needed to. The hon. Gentleman may say that the Opposition did not ask for an election at those times, but if they did not, it was probably only because they knew that, as the Government were so hugely popular, they would lose such an election, which is what happened. Governments do go to the country early, and they do go to the country when they want a mandate. The Government could do that equally well on this occasion.

Dr. Wright: The argument is not that Governments do not go to the electorate early; of course they do. Governments go to the electorate when they think that it is to their maximum advantage to do so. That is a truism of all Governments in all times. That is the truism that I am trying to pass on, in a humble way, to the House. That is why it is essentially dishonest to claim that there is some kind of other constitutional position that demands an election at other times. There is no such position, and there is no such precedent. That is one argument.

Mr. Burns: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is possible that the answer to the question that he asked earlier is 1945? When the wartime coalition broke up, and the Labour party refused to serve in a national Government any longer, it asked for a general election. A Conservative Government were formed, and then the Conservative Government, under Winston Churchill, gave the country an election.

Dr. Wright: I am very happy to discuss 1945 in considerable detail, but I do not think that the hon. Gentleman particularly wants to.

Lembit Öpik: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Wright: I want to finish this point, if I may, because it is the point that I really want to make. If we were in the opposite position, we would be saying exactly the same kind of things, because that is what Oppositions do. That is the game that we play.

I want to suggest to the House—*[Interruption.]* May I make the argument before hon. Members have a go at me about it? I suggest to the House that we are in an exceptional moment. There is a tidal wave of anti-politics running through the country at present. Nobody can deny that. The choice before all parties is whether we seek to ride that tidal wave and try to extract some partisan advantage from it—I can see the temptations of doing that; all Opposition parties will get some reward from riding that tidal wave—or whether we try to turn the wave around. If we do not together turn that wave around, we are in deep trouble.

Irrespective of the usual games that we play, we have a particular responsibility in the House now seriously, together, across party to put aside the game and to try and rebuild some faith in the system. *[Interruption.]* Until we do that, we shall not be able to look the electorate in the eye and ask properly for their support.

Lembit Öpik: I agree in large part with the hon. Gentleman's analysis, but surely he would recognise that the game is played not just by Opposition parties. One of the great frustrations has been that the Government have been masters of spin, which is very much what he is describing. How does he foresee the Opposition and also the party of government shifting away from the spin that has eroded the confidence of the public in what they hear from us, and replacing that with honesty and content?

Dr. Wright: I have said a good deal on that over the years, if I may say so, and I do not want to go there again, because I think and hope we have moved on. What I am trying to say—hon. Members may disagree with me, but it is pretty evident from what has happened in recent weeks and what happened last week—is that we have a house that is burning down. It therefore seems a bizarre moment to say, "Shall we have a competition to decide which colour to paint it?" *[Interruption.]* We have to put the fire out—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): Order. It is only fair to listen to the hon. Gentleman who is addressing the House. If Members want to make interventions, they should do so in the normal way, not from a sedentary position.

Dr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I simply say that we ought to put the fire out. Hon. Members who do not believe that there is a fire burning furiously are not listening to the electorate to whom they keep referring.

Mr. Shepherd: The hon. Gentleman, my near neighbour in Cannock, uses the mixed metaphors of an approaching tidal wave and a fire in a house. It seems to me that the tidal wave might put the fire out. In truth, though, is not the whole point that this Parliament is dead? Our democratic system needs renewal. The agenda is in place and the reforms that we seek will be carried out by an independent authority. This is not a party matter. Every party in the House is affected by the hon. Gentleman's tidal wave. That is the substance behind the argument that democracy must have its say and the people out there must form their new Parliament.

Dr. Wright: I apologise for the mixing of metaphors, but I do not apologise for the argument. I do think that we are in the condition that I described, and millions of people out there are saying that they want nothing to do with this political system until we put our system in order. Hon. Members may disagree with that analysis, but I think that that is the position that we are in. We have a duty and a responsibility to do that, and to do it now.

Pete Wishart: I am trying to listen patiently to the hon. Gentleman's contorted logic. Does he think for a minute that the public want this Parliament—this manure Parliament—to resolve some of these important issues? Surely it is right that we have a new group of people in this place to decide how we go forward, not the present degraded House and establishment?

Dr. Wright: That argument has been put repeatedly, but curiously the situation is not unique, because often out of some great scandal, disaster or catastrophe an opportunity presents itself. I am struck by the fact that, although I and others have made arguments over the years for improving the way in which this Parliament works in a variety of ways, we have made little headway. I mind the reasons why, but there happens now to be an opportunity to do something and it is an opportunity worth taking, because they do not come along very often. It is a shame that this opportunity has come out of the circumstances in which we find ourselves but, my goodness, it is a real opportunity and we should take it.

I wish very much that the nationalist parties had today come forward with a different proposition—a motion for fixed-term Parliaments—because I would have supported them with enthusiasm. When we set up

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the new Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, it would have been thought preposterous if we had given to those people in office the power at any particular moment to decide the timing of an election.

John Mason (Glasgow, East) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman's comments are more thoughtful than those of some of his colleagues, but would he go beyond the idea of a fixed-term Parliament and consider the fact that proportional representation is a key part of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and would strengthen this place, because it combines the party and the individual?

Dr. Wright: The time has come to look at various voting systems, and we have a chance to look afresh at the most appropriate voting system for Westminster, but the hon. Gentleman will not lead me into the whole constitutional agenda, because, although I am tempted, I do not want to go there and the House does not want me to, either.

The nationalist parties should have come forward with that single, sensible proposition: fixed-term Parliaments. As I said to the Prime Minister earlier, the proposition was in our party's manifesto when I was elected in 1992, and I have tried to promote it ever since. Suddenly, however, everyone seems to be in favour of it, including—possibly—the main Opposition party, although we are never quite sure about that. It would be a genuine constitutional innovation of great merit, because we could dispense with debates like this and with the games that we play all the time—the constant nonsense of calling for elections. And I can tell the House something: that would bring huge relief to the electorate.

5.28 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): As always, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), but I must tell him that if he had wanted a fixed-term Parliament Bill, he could have had one—in this Session. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (David Howarth) introduced such a Bill and I supported it, but the Government and Conservative Front-Bench teams rejected it, so the impression that they are the people who can lead us through to the reforms that we so urgently need is a mistaken one. That is why I am very happy not only to congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) on his proposal but to support it in my own name and on behalf of my party.

May I give glad tidings to the nationalist Members? Their sister party, Mebyon Kernow, the Cornish nationalist party, contrived to secure 92 votes in Somerset for the independence of Cornwall. That is a significant achievement. The bad news, I am afraid, is that it did not beat the Labour party in my constituency. The Labour party came sixth, but Mebyon Kernow did not beat it on that occasion.

There are two reasons why we should support the proposal. The first, which has already been touched on of course, is that this Parliament—this House—is catastrophically compromised. It has suffered a monumental loss of respect, and each and every right hon. and hon. Member now needs a new mandate from the people we represent. We need to know that we still enjoy the support of those who sent us here.

The second reason is that the Government are tired and rudderless and do not know what they are doing. Their Prime Minister has no credibility and is not providing leadership. That cannot go on. We cannot, for the best part of another year, have a kind of zombie Government—deceased but not yet interred, stumbling on, uncomprehending and without vision. That is not in the interests of the country and that is why a general election is necessary.

In its heart of hearts, none of the parties represented here wants an immediate election. No matter what they say, they do not desperately want to go straight back to the doorsteps of the nation so soon after a long and bruising campaign for the local and European elections. Judging by the turnout, that campaign did not result in an overwhelming sense of enthusiasm among the general public. Nor do we desperately want to go back to the doorsteps to hear the comments of some of our electors, who have not been universally complimentary about politicians of any hue. They have judged the House and found it wanting because of what they have been told by the press.

Furthermore, none of the parties is entirely prepared for an election. The Conservative party, for instance, would have to find some policies if it were to fight an election next week; it is palpably not prepared. However, the crucial point is that those are all essentially self-serving arguments about the policies and politics of the parties in the House; they are not about what this country and the people of this country need. Whether we are ready for an election or not, I believe that the public are.

Respect for Parliament is a crucial factor, and the collapse in respect for the House is a major reason for letting the public have their say. It affects all hon. Members, including those who have not done, or ever been accused of doing, anything wrong. Unless we are unnaturally purblind in this respect, we know that we need to give the electorate the opportunity to back or sack each and every one of us. As Robert Louis Stevenson once said:

> "We all know what Parliament is, and we are all ashamed of it."

I am thinking not of what Parliament can be but of what it is at this moment.

There has been a collapse of confidence in the Prime Minister. If there is one clear conclusion that we can draw from last week's results, it is that the Prime Minister no longer has the confidence of the people of this country—indeed, he no longer even has the confidence of members of his own party. I hate to quote too much in a speech, but in the immortal words of the Hollies:

> "He's not the man to hold your trust,
> Everything he touches turns to dust."

Mr. Llwyd: What key was that in?

Mr. Heath: I shall sing it to the hon. Gentleman later, if he makes an appointment.

I have explained why we need an immediate election. There is, of course, a counter-argument, and we have heard it—rather inadequately, I may say—from the Secretary of State for Wales. He said that we faced unprecedented economic difficulties, and that is absolutely right. This is a crucial time for this country, but that is why it is so important that we have a mandate for the

difficult policies involved. The Government have done some things that I support, and some have been bold policies. However, they cannot say that they have the support of the British people in carrying them out, and the consequences will be with us for a long time. I do not buy the notion that we cannot have an election in the middle of an economic crisis because, as the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said, major democracies across the world have done so, and prospered as a consequence.

A second argument for not having a general election is the one put forward, to some extent, by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase—that this Parliament has got us into a mess, and therefore this Parliament, and this Government, need to clear it up. That is like the "polluter pays" principle, but the trouble is that it is the taxpayer who pays and the polluter who stays, and that is what so many of our fellow countrymen find so difficult to accept. It would be easier to accept that argument if there were a clear, and very quick, timetable for some of the improvements that are being talked about, but every time I hear the Prime Minister I fail to hear the urgency that is necessary if we are to do this job quickly and clinically, enabling us to go to the country at an early date.

Michael Connarty: I have heard this a few times. People say that things are going to change and be structurally different, and that we are waiting for it to happen. My understanding is that a document was sent to every single Member saying that the House has decided—led, I believe, by the Prime Minister—that there will be no more allowances for anyone to purchase any furniture, so even Members who had to give back the price of their trouser press will not be tempted to buy another one and ask the taxpayer to pay. The sum of money available for rent or paying a mortgage on a second home, which I believe should be a home in London, will be reduced to £1,250, so the Leader of the Opposition will no longer be able to claim £1,700 per month for his mortgage. These things have already been done. They are in place and have been ruled on by the Members Estimate Committee, so they are binding at this moment. No Minister, or anyone else, will be allowed to have a house outside London—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman has made his point.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman has not only made his point but undermined his own argument. If we think that everything in the garden is rosy, then there is no obstacle to the general election that some of us believe should be held, but that is not the case. We have done some very basic things that some of us called for a long time ago, but they are far insufficient in meeting what is needed. If he really thinks that that is enough to regain the trust of the electorate, I can only suggest that he has not been on the doorsteps in recent weeks with enough assiduity.

The third argument against having a general election concerns the point that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks made so amusingly about chaos theory—the Prime Minister's idea that we would somehow be plunged into irremediable chaos were we to have a general election. I do not buy that for one moment. However, let me share something that I seem to remember from a long time ago in the days when I was attempting to do physiological sciences. There is a sort of chaos that is often observed at a microscopic level among very small organisms within an aqueous medium: it is called Brownian motion, and that is what we have seen from the Government recently.

So what has been the Government's response to this crisis of confidence in the House and in the Government? We have had yet another of the Prime Minister's regular relaunches. Sadly, he is getting into a situation similar to that of the former right hon. Member for Huntingdon—he has been relaunched almost as many times as the Padstow lifeboat. It never really does the job, because one can only relaunch one's boat so many times when it is leaking below the waterline, as is the case at the moment.

We have had a re-engineered Cabinet. A Department that was created only a year ago has been subsumed by another one—purely, it would appear, for the greater glorification of the noble Lord Mandelson. I will not go through the whole of his nomenclature, as the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks did, but it occurs to me that this new Department will need very wide doors if his name is to be displayed appropriately.

We have a new Cabinet. Is anybody excited by it? Does anyone feel it will supply the answers to the country's problems? As the right hon. Gentleman said, there will be seven people attending Cabinet who are not elected Members. I would have thought that that situation would be familiar to the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury rather than to a Government in the 21st century, yet that is what we now have. It suggests that there is a conspicuous lack of talent in this elected House if that is what the Prime Minister has to rely on. Or perhaps those who will serve in his Cabinet do not have the talent, and those who have the talent will not serve in his Cabinet. Either way, it does not suggest a Prime Minister with the confidence of either his colleagues or the country.

Today, we heard a cobbled-together programme of constitutional change. It picked up bits and pieces of what other people have suggested over the years, but was all developed in the secretive and obscure way that is always the modus operandi of this Prime Minister. It tells us everything we need to know about him that his idea of consensus is to have this Committee of Public Safety, or whatever it is called, with no Opposition parties invited to contribute. Do not invite anyone who might disagree—that is the way to build consensus, is it not? It establishes immediate consensus.

Today's statement was issued to the leaders of the other parties a quarter of an hour before Prime Minister's questions. The Prime Minister then challenged them to establish a consensus by agreeing with what he and his cronies had put together as a proposal for a constitutional change. Then he had the gall to say that that was the new politics, the change, the way we were now going to do things to establish democratic renewal based on the agreement of all parties and people across the country.

The Prime Minister has said repeatedly that he is the man to cure Parliament of its ills. However, he is the man who, when the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (David Maclean) was trying to exempt the House from freedom of information legislation, could not be bothered to turn up to vote. Members can look it up in *Hansard* for 20 April 2007. That was the sort of

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leadership that the Prime Minister showed. He allowed Government Whips to do their job and help the Bill to go through, and he allowed them to vote, but he absented himself. So did the Secretary of State for Wales.

The Prime Minister is the man who, on 3 July last year, when there was a perfectly proper proposal from the House of Commons Commission to bring in independent auditing of Members' allowances, was again not here. He was not present to support that proposal, and he allowed it to be amended out of the Commission's proposals, so this House managed to escape proper independent auditing of allowances for yet another year. He now says that he is the man to reform the system in this House. He is not the man, because he is not a leader. He is in fact an obstacle to reform, and has been for 12 years now.

Mr. MacNeil: The Prime Minister has been here for only 11 per cent. of Divisions since becoming Prime Minister. By contrast, the First Minister of Scotland has attended 86 per cent. of Divisions in the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Heath: I am not sure that that is exactly the statistic that I would have used had I been the hon. Gentleman; nevertheless it is immediately apparent that there is a lack of leadership. That leadership is not coming from the front of the Prime Minister's party, from the back or even from behind home lines. This Prime Minister is failing in his duty to provide leadership. Personally, I therefore have no confidence in the Prime Minister or his Government.

I do not believe that my constituents have any confidence in the Prime Minister or the Government. My worry is not that they have no confidence in the Labour party and its doings, but that they have no confidence in Parliament. That is enormously dangerous for our democracy. If our electors do not have confidence in the House to do the job for which it is elected, the House is doing democracy an enormous disservice. That should be a matter not for any one party but for the public to sort out.

It should not be for the Prime Minister and his gang but for the people to decide whether there should be a general election. We do not have fixed-term Parliaments in this country; we have a system whereby the Government of the day choose the date of an election. So be it, but they must listen. At the moment, they are not listening to what the public say. There is only one solution to the predicament in which we find ourselves: we should let the people decide through the ballot box. They should do so forthwith.

5.46 pm

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): It was a great pleasure to listen to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). I feel somewhat deprived in that I was never able—doubtless because of my political affiliations—to attend one of his famous after-dinner speeches. It has therefore been a great privilege to hear today an outstanding example of a pre-dinner speech for free, on which I congratulate him.

I would give the right hon. Gentleman's analysis of the reasons for calling for an early general election more credence if he had not been part of a Government in 1997 who hung on to almost the last minute of the last hour of the last day. I appreciate that a week is a long time in politics, and we can all have selective memories, so I enjoyed the contribution, if not the analysis.

Mr. Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. McGuire: All right then. The hon. Gentleman tempts me—I do not know why, but he does.

Mr. Bacon: Many women say that to me.

It is not a case of selective memory on the part of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). Indeed, he and many of us think that we should not go through it all again precisely because of the memory of what happened in 1997.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South) (Lab): And in 1992.

Mrs. McGuire: My hon. Friend is right. The hon. Gentleman makes a valiant attempt not at seduction but at producing an argument out of very little.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) who gave a considered analysis of where we are now and why we should reject the motion. If hon. Members have no confidence in Her Majesty's Government, we should debate a motion on that, not some camouflage about calling general elections. As my hon. Friend said, it is the tradition in the British system—it may change; we may move to a system of fixed Parliaments, to which some of us are attracted—that deciding when to call a general election is the prerogative of the Prime Minister of the day. Some spurious arguments have been made this afternoon to try to justify an unjustifiable position.

I want to pick up on the nationalists' decision to table such a motion. I am astonished that they have chosen such a subject for debate when the country, along with the rest of the world, faces the most serious financial and economic crisis in a generation. They have chosen to use their valuable Opposition time to engage in superficial posturing. I would have thought that they might want to have a debate on how this country—this Government and this Parliament—has dealt with the economic crisis.

Pete Wishart: Badly.

Mrs. McGuire: I suggest that hon. Gentleman should have put down a motion asking us to compare how this Government have dealt with the economic crisis with how it has been dealt with by some of the countries in the arc of prosperity, of which we are all so fond. We could then compare how this Government are dealing with the economic crisis with, for example, how Ireland is dealing with it, where there has been a 25 per cent. cut in public services and where benefits for the over-70s are being cut radically. Let us compare that with what is happening in Britain. VAT in Ireland is now more than 20 per cent. Let us compare that with what has happened in this country, where the Government have cut VAT. The manufacturing base in Ireland has collapsed and the construction industry has all but collapsed. That would have been a valid debate.

Michael Connarty: It might be useful to look at what the Government did to save the Scottish economy at the same time. More than £60 billion went into saving the two Scottish banks that basically caused the crisis. As Lord Myners said last week in his evidence to the European Scrutiny Committee, we must not forget that the cause of the collapse of the economy lies with the banks, particularly the Scottish banks. We now have £200 billion of toxic debt, which we took on board to save the Scottish economy, which is much lauded by the Opposition parties.

Mrs. McGuire: The reality is that if the nationalists had their way and we were a separate country from the rest of the United Kingdom, those two major financial institutions would not have survived the economic tsunami that swept over them last autumn.

John Mason *rose—*

Mrs. McGuire: I will come to the hon. Gentleman in just a second, so he might want to keep his powder dry for the moment.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) is not in the Chamber now. He highlighted opinion polls and what they tell us. However, he failed to recognise that yesterday's ComRes poll for the "Daily Politics" showed that the majority of Scots were opposed to a general election and opposed to the Prime Minister resigning. They rejected the alternative—the Leader of the Opposition—as a Prime Minister. According to the poll, in answer to the question, "Should Gordon Brown resign immediately?", 68 per cent. of Scots said no. In answer to the question, "Should there be a general election now?", 55 per cent. said no. In answer to the question, "Do you agree with this statement: 'The Leader of the Opposition has what it takes to be a good Prime Minister'?", 55 per cent. said no. If we are going to start trading opinion polls, let us put them all on the table, not just the selected few that the hon. Gentleman put before us today.

The SNP is indulging in what it does best, which is playground politics, when the people of Scotland and the United Kingdom are looking to the Government to support them through the challenges that they face in coping with the recession. People are looking to a Government who will continue to invest in our public services through these difficult times. They are also looking at this Parliament to ensure that we deal with a discredited expenses regime that has brought us all shame and embarrassment.

Mr. MacNeil: If the right hon. Lady is confident of the Government's performance, surely she has nothing to fear from a general election.

Mrs. McGuire: This is the point my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase highlighted: if we had a general election every time the hon. Gentleman, his colleagues or anyone else on the Opposition Benches called for one, then—heaven help us—we would be in and out of general elections more often than the tongue could tell. The constitutional position is that it is the Prime Minister's and the Government's prerogative to go to the Queen and ask for a general election. If those on the Opposition Benches want to say that they have no confidence in Her Majesty's Government, they should have the courage of their convictions and say that, and not try to cloak it in camouflage about a general election that will do for us all.

I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) is no longer in his place. He paid us a state visit today for a few minutes, but his time would have been far better spent looking at how the construction industry in Scotland is falling off a cliff because the Scottish Futures Trust is not up and running. I ask the House to consider the political judgment of a First Minister who despises the Union of the nations of the United Kingdom, yet comes to the embodiment of the Union in this Parliament to take part in what is frankly a piece of political theatre while important legislation on sexual offences is being debated and voted on in the Scottish Parliament—a body of which he is the political leader. I am sorry that he is not here in his place to hear this, but he certainly trailed to the whole of the media in Scotland that he was coming here to participate in this debate today.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the theatre that we are seeing here today is based on nothing other than the nationalists' desire for independence, because Scotland will not tolerate a Conservative Government led by the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron)?

Mrs. McGuire: This is a plea to the Conservatives and perhaps even to some of the thinking Liberals: they need to be very careful when getting into bed with the nationalists. The nationalists are not about making this democracy or this House stronger. They are about taking Scotland out of the United Kingdom. That is why we are having this debate today. It gives them another opportunity to pursue that agenda.

We should not be surprised about that, however, because bringing down a Labour Government is part of the SNP's DNA. It did it once, and it hopes that it can do it again. I challenge the hon. Members representing the SNP in this House to look at what happened the last time they got into bed with the Conservatives—

Hon. Members: You got beat!

Gordon Banks: Scotland got beat.

Mrs. McGuire: I can deal with the hon. Member from Tayside—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot have these interventions from a sedentary position. This is serious; they simply spark off interventions across the House. It is only fair to listen to what the right hon. Lady is saying.

Mrs. McGuire: Hon. Members say that we got beat. I remind them that the price the Scottish National party paid in 1979 was to go down from 11 MPs to two, because the Scottish people saw through the ruse that it perpetrated.

John Mason: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. McGuire: I will take the hon. Gentleman's intervention now, but I promise him that he will have a second chance in a few moments.

John Mason: I appreciate the right hon. Lady giving way. Does she accept that, in 1979, the Scottish people could see a difference between the Labour party and the Conservative party? Now, they cannot see a difference. On Iraq, Royal Mail privatisation, Trident and budget cuts, the parties are both the same.

Mrs. McGuire: In some respects, I wish that I had not let the hon. Gentleman in, because I am going to deal with some of those issues in a minute and give the House some personal information that he might find interesting.

I want to ask the House to reflect on the situation in 1979, when the leader of the nationalists in this House was the late Donald Stewart. I think it was agreed on all sides that he was an honourable and conscientious Member of Parliament. On 28 March 1979, during a debate on a motion of no confidence, he said of Mrs. Thatcher—now the noble Baroness Thatcher:

"The Scottish people will educate her". [*Official Report*, 28 March 1979; Vol. 965, c. 489.]

Well, if there was ever a time when a good man called it wrong, that was it. I often wonder whether, in the 18 long years of the last Conservative Government, Donald Stewart or any of those other 10 nationalist MPs ever stopped to reflect in sorrow on the consequences of their actions that night. As I suggested earlier, some of them had plenty of time to reflect, because nine of them were not returned to this House.

Mr. MacNeil: I wonder, given those 18 long years of Tory rule over Scotland without a mandate, whether the right hon. Lady would have preferred an independent Scotland, perhaps led by a Labour Government with Donald Dewar at the helm?

Mrs. McGuire: To talk about whether we would have wanted an independent Scotland is such a hoary old chestnut. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we do not accept that an independent Scotland is the way forward in the 21st century. We believe that we are stronger together than we are apart—*[Interruption.]* I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has a fundamental difference of opinion with us on that, and I have no objection to his taking an opposite view, but to be frank, the question he asked is spurious, to use that word again.

Let me deal with the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason), who I heard saying on the radio the other night that he would bring down any UK Government because he was a nationalist—or words to that effect. *[Interruption.]* He may well rub his hands with glee, but his constituency is one I grew up in—it was then known as Glasgow, Provan—and my father was a regional councillor in the old Strathclyde region. The hon. Gentleman may well think it fun to bring down a UK Government, so let me tell him that when he and his erstwhile colleagues in those days rushed to bring down a Labour Government, they ushered in some of the darkest days for the communities he now represents. Those communities were almost destroyed by unemployment and deprivation during those years, when a Conservative Government were prepared to stand back and let things take their course. The former constituency of Glasgow, Provan had an unemployment rate of about 35 per cent.

Adam Price: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. McGuire: No, I am dealing with an area that I know particularly well. I was saying that the unemployment rate was 35 per cent., and by 1988 some 57 per cent. of working women in Scotland did not have a wage sufficient to support them. There were streets in the community I grew up in where once everyone went out to work, but by the end of the Thatcher years, nobody went out to work. That was the price that the nationalists thought was worth paying in 1979. The hon. Member for Glasgow, East and his colleagues are leopards that have never changed their spots.

Adam Price: But is it not the case that if the Labour Government had not gerrymandered the result of the referendum in Scotland, the people of Glasgow and of Scotland would have had a Scottish Parliament to protect them through the dark days of Thatcherism? The fact that that did not happen was the responsibility of the Labour Government of the time.

Mrs. McGuire: The hon. Gentleman should go back and read the debate on the motion of no confidence in 1979—and the lead-up to it—and see what was offered by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, in order to deal with some of the issues in the referendum debate. What happened was that a nationalist group decided to put their faith in a Conservative leader and it told the people of Scotland that she would be educated by them. She was no more educated by them than she could fly.

John Mason: I appreciate the right hon. Lady's generosity in giving way a second time, having mentioned my constituency. Does she accept that something strange happened last summer when people in an area of this country, even if we call it the UK, who had voted Labour faithfully in council and all other elections over years and decades somehow lost trust with and failed to vote for the Labour party?

Mrs. McGuire: I do not want to go into history lessons about the hon. Gentleman's area, as I am not nearly as good at history as the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks. If the hon. Gentleman looked at the history of his constituency, however, he would find that it was once represented by three nationalist councillors and that he himself represented a third of that constituency, so the suggestion that people in his area had never flirted with other political parties is frankly—I do not want to say untrue—not an accurate reflection of the picture.

Gordon Banks: Does my right hon. Friend wish to comment on the history created in the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason) last Thursday in the European elections, which demonstrated something quite different from what he has been trying to tell the House?

Mrs. McGuire: I did not attend the count in Glasgow, but I understand that the count in one particular district gave a strong indication that the hon. Gentleman might, to use a well-known Scottish phrase, "find his jaicket on a shoogly nail"—and I will translate that later for *Hansard*.

Let me say a little about my constituency. It contains mining villages that were decimated during those 18 long years. Lives were shattered and people were marginalised by a Government who engaged in a political strategy to smash a mining industry, and failed to provide any alternative employment. My constituency contains rural areas where there was no investment in education or transport. It took the re-emergence of a Labour Government, and then a Labour-led Scottish Executive, to ensure that the schools in my constituency were either rebuilt or refurbished, and to ensure the commissioning of a new hospital which had been a dream for 40 or 50 years—a dream which, I believe, was shared by the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Gordon Banks).

I say to the nationalists, "Put your political posturing to one side. Last time you did this, it cost the Scottish people dear. Tonight many Members will join you in the Lobby, but do not be flattered, because they flatter to deceive, just as they did last time."

The nationalists are playing political games when people in Scotland and people across the United Kingdom are looking to this Government, and indeed to the Scottish Government, for responsibility and leadership to get us through difficult times. This motion is self-indulgence of the worst kind. It exposes the willingness of members of the SNP and their colleagues in Plaid Cymru—who, admittedly, did not vote to bring down a Labour Government on the last occasion—to be used by a Conservative party which, if it were ever given the chance again, would introduce a spending regime that, albeit cloaked in different and softer words, would make it almost impossible for them and us to deliver the necessary services to the Scottish people and to people across the United Kingdom. The last time the Scottish nationalists played midwife to a Tory Government, they thought that it was a price worth paying. Labour Members will do all that we can to prevent that from ever happening again.

6.7 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) for tabling the motion. Very rarely do we debate a subject as broad as the dissolution of the House. If I may, however, I will not follow the nationalists' line of argument, and I regret that I am also unable to follow that of the Secretary of State for Wales. I can only reflect that he may have been distracted by the thought that he was securing his position as a new Cabinet Minister and therefore could not really give his attention to the issue.

This is not, in truth, about the popularity or otherwise of a Government; Governments are unpopular from time to time. Indeed, it is not just about the unpopularity of a Prime Minister. Goodness—if we got rid of Prime Ministers just because they were unpopular, we would never have a public policy in this country. This is about more. It is about the dissolution of Parliament, and that means our going to face the people as well.

I do not want either to follow the line that was so adequately—so heroically—addressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). It is the classic and great spirit of Parliament to mock, to identify and to twist the truths into the nerves of those who face us across the Floor of the House. My right hon. Friend produced a compelling argument and gave a profoundly good performance as a parliamentarian.

What I want to examine is the argument that my right hon. Friend could not address, because at that stage it had not been presented. I refer, of course, to the argument of the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright). If I understand it correctly, the hon. Gentleman's argument is that this awful time when the House is at its greatest discount—when it is being judged by the public, possibly not even reasonably, because of the extent of their present fury—is essentially not a time for a general election, because the electorate may, in their rage and anger, sweep away that which may be good or right about this House. This is a profoundly important argument.

This House as a collective, and including the Government, has in its time been profoundly unpopular. We only have to think of the long march, of which the Labour party was an integral part, towards reaching democratic and accountable government. In 1832, this House and the other place feared revolution. They wanted to hold to their established ways of doing things. The men of Birmingham and Wolverhampton marched through Walsall, seeking to acquire some very limited form of representation, and there were those who harrumphed that this country hung on the edge of revolution and that that which was good would be swept away. In the event, the moderation and reasonableness of the people of Britain—in this instance, the people of England—prevailed, and that tiny step was taken.

In 1865, an extraordinary thing happened. In 1860, a Prime Minister had set his face against a further extension that would enfranchise a larger part of the nation. Gladstone could not achieve such a thing when he was Prime Minister, but Disraeli, with the co-operation of Gladstone and the voice and arguments of Bright across this land, achieved something that shaped and formed the character of the Chamber in which we sit today. Let us not doubt it: reaction would have seen that off.

As to revolutionary responses that sweep things away, many people out there, in their understandable rage, want to sweep us away and thereby sweep away continuity. I must address the hon. Gentleman's remarks by saying that I do not fear that. Half of the Members of this House will probably remain, and half will leave. In that turn of events there will be a natural renewal of the House, whenever an election comes. A previous argument then returns: do we not think that the electorate are making an irrational judgment? Who are we to claim that? Is doing so not a display of self-serving self-satisfaction? Do the people not have the right to do this if they judge that the Government should change? It is pointed out that we have constitutional practice, and a Government are, by statute, in place for five years. The current Government have been in office for four years, and the tradition in this country is that, by and large, a modern Government seek a four-year term. It is said that we can extend that because there are important and necessary things to be done to prepare the new Parliament for, perhaps, a better prospect.

That is where the speech of my right hon. Friend comes into play. What are these important things? Of course, the economy is the issue that grinds away in my constituency, along with contempt for the way in which we as individuals have handled our expenses. It is the economy, in truth; that is where we should justify ourselves.

[Mr. Richard Shepherd]

We on the Back Benches are not the Government. We hold the Government to account, and that function does not belong solely and exclusively to those on these Benches. This House has lost its lustre because people who stood as Labour candidates, were elected as Labour Members and who believe in Labour policies did not think it necessary to insist that the Government's policies should be argued and reasoned, and that they could go forth and convince the people that the Government's policies were worthy, because the Government won the argument.

Unfortunately, the evacuation from the Chamber of the Secretary of State for Wales meant that he did not answer the questions put by my right hon. Friend about the conduct of business. As the hon. Gentleman said, we now have an opportunity for this House to revive itself. I believe that profoundly, but with this personnel—with these Members—it cannot have the confidence or authority to sustain a Government. That is what the House does, collectively, but this Government have no purpose now.

The reform of expenses has now been taken out of the hands of this House, effectively, because the people have thrown their derision and scorn at it. Freedom of information was mentioned, and one need only look at the list of those who voted, including Ministers, because they were available on a Friday. Whips were imposed by both parties—I do not pretend otherwise—to defy the very principle of open government and our accountability for our use of public money.

We comforted ourselves with the thought that the system was out of the sight of others and that our integrity was reinforced by the fact that it was authorised. That has been swept aside, and we all recognise that. A process is under way. We look forward to Sir Christopher's review. We will bear it heavily, perhaps, but it is right that the people should have the response that they wanted and that this is no longer in our hands.

This issue should not be about the Prime Minister outbidding the Leader of the Opposition, or about star chambers. The Prime Minister used the term, but a Star Chamber put fear into this country for 100 years. The king appointed judges to sit in a little courtroom not far from here. He made charges, and strangely enough, his chosen judges found people guilty and he would then say that the verdict was right. That is what we have slipped into in our crisis. It denigrates our tradition of liberty and it is contrary to our sense of process and fair trial. That is what we have reduced ourselves to—to accepting that, when we can do better.

It will not be for us to do better. Our time has passed. This House is dead on its feet and it needs the renewal of authority that, in our tradition and purpose, justifies its being a cradle of democracy and the little Chamber that was once an example to the world. That is the restoration that we can seek through the people. This House has no time left. Whatever initiative is announced or programme proposed, there will be a summer recess and a Queen's Speech, but we all know that the parties will be working on their manifestos. That is what it is about. Perhaps some still hope that something will turn up, but the public mind knows that we are a busted flush. In truth, we know that too: there should be an election.

6.20 pm

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). He speaks with great sincerity, but he and I are coming from opposite sides of the argument. I come from a background where, if something has gone wrong, the duty lies with the individual or individuals who have got it wrong to start to put things right and to mend—*[Interruption.]* He says from a sedentary position that we have, and, yes, I think we have put interim measures in place to deal with the whole allowances fiasco. An independent reviewer will come to us with their views. I sincerely hope that the whole House would get 100 per cent. behind that and would accept what is being said.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): One of the problems is that people in the areas where some of the MPs who have abused the allowances system are standing down will not have any representation. It is not realistic to call umpteen by-elections, which need to happen. In those seats, people will not accept MPs simply standing down but—potentially—getting a salary for another nine months and a pay-off. Those MPs should go now. The only way to do that sensibly, I am afraid, is to dissolve this House and call an election, so that we can get rid of those people who have abused the system in the ways that we have seen over the past few weeks.

Mr. Brown: I accept, to a certain extent, what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but let me go back to the point made by the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) in opening the debate. There is a clear indication that at the moment people are fixated—justifiably so—on the allowances and the expenditure that falls into the hands of elected Members, and on the way in which some people have abused that. I have committed things to writing in the past on allowances, and I have said things. In the past couple of months, I have voted in a certain way. Never in my wildest imagination did I recognise what was going on. I defy anyone to stand up and say, "Well, I knew that that was going on." I do not think that the majority of this House did. What the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) says makes sense. I do not fear for myself, because there was life before this House and there will be life after it, but I do fear that we will sweep away far too many good and decent people. We have a judgment to make. Do we tolerate for another few months those who might have abused the system, or do we run the risk of sweeping away honest, decent people who deserve to come back here to build on the strengths that we have put in place?

May I quote a few words? They are

"to serve our country—that is all we ask."

Those were the words used by the late John Smith some 15 years ago in a speech he made the evening before, tragically, he passed away. Members—and I would include myself—would do well on occasion to remember why we are in this House. We are here to represent people. We are not here to save our political skins or our necks. We are here to do a job. I fear the results of the hostility towards each and every one of us, which I witnessed during the European election campaign. I witnessed people who would normally support my party saying on polling day that they were not coming out. It was their chance to protest. We all saw what happened last Thursday.

Dissolution would mean an election, and an election is about policies and manifestos. We would be asking people to vote when they were angry, and not really aware of what any party was proposing. Some might say that it is time for change, and we have heard that often enough. It was time for change back in 1997, when my party brought forward a manifesto containing pledges on a national minimum wage, devolved Government, the new deal, cutting class sizes and NHS investment. People who wanted change could get behind that manifesto.

The people who have led today's debate said that it was time for change two years ago, but I do not believe that they expected to be able to form a minority Administration in Scotland after that election. The Scottish National party's manifesto contained a number of pledges, but it is important that people who lay out their stall in that way stick to what they propose.

The pledge to introduce a local income tax failed. Up to now at least, the pledge on the Scottish futures trust has also failed, and there have been failures on class sizes, probationary teachers and student debt.

Mr. MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the governing party in Scotland has 47 MSPs, yet the Budget in Scotland was approved by a majority of more than 120.

Mr. Brown: There was undoubtedly significant wheeling and dealing—grown-up politics, but fundamentally different from delivering on pledges and commitments to the people.

The Scottish Administration have failed on police numbers, prison overcrowding and support for first-time buyers. I am only disappointed that I could not get hold of the Scottish National party's election leaflet so that I could bring it to the debate and say, "Could do significantly better."

Pete Wishart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: No, as I have only two or three minutes. At general elections, people deserve to have manifestos laid before them.

Mr. Bacon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: No, as I am not taking any more interventions. People deserve to have policies and manifestos laid out before them, but before I finish I want to take up the earlier reference to 1979.

My late and good comrade Bob Cryer began his contribution to the debate on 28 March 1979 at 8.20 pm by saying:

"That is characteristic of the Tories. They are not acting from principle. Their principle is opportunism. As the Prime Minister pointed out, the SNP put down a motion and the Tories went into action to follow it up. The Tories did not produce their motion for any reasons that they could adduce about the state of the nation or the economy."

He went on to say:

"The Opposition often betray a duality of standards...the chairman of the Conservative party could be receiving £30,000 per year from Pirelli, a company which is apparently overcharging the Post Office by £9 million a year."—[*Official Report*, 28 March 1979; Vol. 965, c. 552-53.]

He went on to talk about the individual responsibility that every hon. Member bears.

Mr. Bacon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: Given that the hon. Gentleman is bigger than me, I will give way very briefly to him.

Mr. Bacon: I detected some dissatisfaction on the hon. Gentleman's part with what the Scottish National party had said and subsequently done. Will he explain how it was that the Scottish nationalists were supported so strongly by the Scottish people?

Mr. Brown: Let me say to the hon. Gentleman, above the guffawing that is going on, that I expected a honeymoon period, but it has gone beyond that and what the Scottish National party has had is more than a fair wind; it has been a love-in that John Lennon and Yoko Ono would have thought brilliant. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire, North (Jim Sheridan) says from a sedentary position that the SNP Government are not doing anything. They complain and whinge about a £500 million cut in a Budget, when in actual fact they are getting—people need to know this—£700 million extra this coming year.

Mr. MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brown: No, because, in spite of all this, I wish to finish by paying a compliment to the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). I want to share a secret with him and everyone else in the House—nobody else is really going to know this. At the time his party was selecting its last leader, I was in a room with about 15 other people who were all members of a Conservative association—I did not know that at the time. I said that the best individual to lead their party was him and that he would be the next Conservative Prime Minister. I think his time as party leader came early, because as far as I am concerned he stands head and shoulders above anyone else on the Conservative Benches. That may upset the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron) and I sincerely hope that it is not the kiss of death for the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks.

In conclusion, I thought that this evening we might have been able to get an answer from the SNP to a question that it was asked twice: what would it prefer to see after the next election? Would the SNP prefer to see a Labour Government or a Tory Government returned to this House? What is the SNP's view? We do not get an answer to that.

Mr. MacNeil: Can I get an answer from the hon. Gentleman that I failed to get from the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire)? Would he have preferred an independent Scotland with a Labour Government during the 1980s or 18 years of a Tory Government from Westminster? What is his answer?

Mr. Brown: Let me say slowly, so that the hon. Gentleman can understand, that Labour is a party of the Union; we do not believe in independence. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said, we would much have preferred to see a different form of words used today; the nationalists could have used this Opposition day debate in a much more constructive manner. They have failed, and although the people of Scotland have not recognised it yet, they will do; time will catch up with the SNP. I hope that my Labour colleagues will vote against the motion.

6.33 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) (PC): We have had a wide-ranging debate, which started with a fine speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson). He referred to the fact that the public are demanding that we go to the people and ask for a fresh mandate. I believe that what he said was right, and that this whole idea of the British National party was not an aberration; it is not going to go away unless we tackle it head on. One of the reasons why that evil has come into politics is because Parliament is discredited as an institution—that is obvious.

It would have been better if the Prime Minister had been here for this debate, because many of the points raised in it were made in his earlier statement, with which I agreed almost entirely. The timing and the re-announcements perhaps were not good, but generally what he said was good and worthy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray referred to the fact that this is not, and is not meant to be, a motion of no confidence. He mentioned the various surveys and opinion polls that have been carried out recently, which found that the vast majority of the public have come out in favour of an immediate election. We are talking not about one or two polls but about several, and the majorities involved have often been very large. We will doubtless be able to read the exact percentages at our leisure. He rightly said that we need to grasp the nettle, because we must sort this out. The expenses scandal has been sorted out in part, but we need to accept what the Kelly commission says, be it good, bad or indifferent. We need to accept it fully, because we cannot cherry-pick. If we do so, we will be back in the same position. My hon. Friend put to rest the idea that it is wrong to have an election during an economic crisis, referring to India, the USA, Canada and other places. The idea that we cannot have an election is preposterous, as was underlined very well also by other speakers, including the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague).

The Secretary of State for Wales is out of practice as a Front Bencher, I have to say. He picked up a speech that was frankly not worthy of him. He did not write that speech, because it was drivel. He would not have written it; I say that because I know that he is an intelligent man. However, as the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said, we are all playing the game. The Secretary of State played the game but, with respect, not very well. That was not his fault; it was the fault of the speech-writer—*[Interruption.]* Oh, it was? I beg the Secretary of State's pardon. I am awfully sorry, but he is out of practice, after all. I welcome him back.

Mr. MacNeil: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Llwyd: I have very limited time left; I am sorry. The Secretary of State has conceded defeat at the next election, because he said that calamity would follow if the motion were put to the vote and the vote was won. He referred to lancing the boil, but waiting nine months to lance a boil is not, medically, a good idea. Boils need to be lanced fairly quickly. Waiting would only lead to septicaemia; I know that, and I am not a doctor. There was a bit of knockabout, I accept, but at the end of the day, the Secretary of State needs a bit of practice. However, I welcome him back; he is a worthy Front-Bench Member, but he was skewered once or twice by pretty sharp interventions from Members on the nationalist Benches; some pretty accurate darts were thrown, I thought.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, in an erudite speech—which is what we expect of him—referred to the tasks ahead. He spoke of the national democratic renewal council, that wonderful institution, reflective of everyone in the House, that is peopled by Ministers and that meets behind closed doors. No doubt it will be given a great deal of credence and will have a great deal of legitimacy when it comes together. He said, rightly, that the majority of people now believe that an election is necessary. He referred to the polls, and rightly said that dissolution is really in the public interest. He mentioned that Labour support is at its lowest since the 18th century. He referred to the famous time when the Prime Minister bottled an election, and said that the Prime Minister does not want one now because there might be "chaos".

The reference made by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks to Ceausescu was interesting. It was meant to be a jest, but there is some rather interesting background to it. No doubt the new national democratic renewal council will be quoted at length on the "Supreme Leader" page of *Private Eye*. It reminds one of some lines written by Brecht—whom we all read regularly, no doubt—after the anti-Government riots in East Berlin in 1953:

> "After the uprising of the 17th of June
> The Secretary of the Writers Union
> Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
> Stating that the people
> Had forfeited the confidence of the government
> And could win it back only
> By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
> In that case for the government
> To dissolve the people
> And elect another?"

That does make one think about the situation in general. The right hon. Gentleman went on to refer to the huge democracies of India and the USA, which had elections in an orderly manner—no whiff of chaos there, but apparently the Prime Minister believes it is impossible to have an election here because it would be chaotic. That undermines the credence and the intelligence of the British people.

Chris Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Llwyd: I have no time; I am sorry. If the hon. Gentleman had remained in the Chamber throughout the debate, I probably would have given way to him.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks, referred in a very humorous manner to Cardinal Wolsey and to Lord Mandelson—*[Interruption.]*—or Archbishop Mandelson. That was a tour de force. It was hugely amusing and very effective.

I turn now to the contribution of the hon. Member for Cannock Chase. With respect, I do not think that he got things right—unusually for a gentleman who speaks very well on such subjects. He referred to the motion as dishonest and dangerous, but it is neither. It is called for by the people, and we believe that we are responding to

what the people want. He said that we play the game, and yes, we do, but he then said that Governments call elections when they think they can win them. That is playing the game, is it not? That is the worst form of game, in my view.

The hon. Gentleman missed the point. The motion is unprecedented. There has never been a motion of this kind before Parliament before. Oppositions have tabled motions of no confidence, but this is a dissolution motion by Parliament and of Parliament, and it is quite different from any previous motion. Unusually, I find myself completely at variance with the hon. Gentleman's normally well-informed views.

In a thoughtful speech, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), mentioned two main reasons why he supported the motion—that Parliament was compromised and the fact we have lost respect, and that we should go back to the people to seek a mandate. He spoke of the collapse of confidence in the Government and in the Prime Minister, and said that the economic difficulties made it even more pressing and more important for us to go to the country. He said that if a timetable were forthcoming for the work to be completed and if the date of an election were announced, that might be better, but he referred to the Government's response to the crisis of confidence. There is indeed a crisis of confidence. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister is failing in leadership.

The right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) referred to a poll which supported keeping the Prime Minister in place. It was a poll of fewer than 100 people—perhaps not the most persuasive evidence in support, and not really a poll. She also let slip during her speech that a general election would do for us all. That may be so, but it is not a reason not to go to the country. I am afraid it was rather a self-serving speech, characterised by continuous attacks on the Scottish National party and little else.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) made a very thoughtful contribution, as he always does, referring to history—1832, the long march, the fear of revolution, 1865 and so on. He said that if there were a poll, perhaps half the House would go and half would remain, and that in itself would be renewal. That is absolutely right. Neither the hon. Gentleman nor any other Member should fear going to the people, letting them make their voice heard, and reacting accordingly. It was a very good speech.

The hon. Gentleman described the current situation as a busted flush. That is exactly what it is. People out there believe that this institution is badly damaged. As usual, his logic was unanswerable, and the oratory—I call it that—commanded absolute silence in the Chamber. That silence was eloquent.

From the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr. Brown), finally, we had a walk round the trees and the woods, and some insults to the Scottish National party. He came up with several answers to several questions, but one question that he could not answer was that if the Scottish Government, God help them, are so bad, why are they running away with the polls in Scotland?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows to face the House, if only for the *Hansard* writers.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman made his points in a rather theatrical manner. The question that he could not answer was why the Scottish Government did so fantastically well last week if they are letting the Scots people down. In every opinion poll, consistently, their support goes up and through the roof. There we have it. We heard a speech that did not take us very far.

We have had a good debate. It was worth having. The motion is not a no confidence motion; it is about the credibility of Parliament. Many of us in many parties believe, as I am sure in their heart of hearts do many Labour Members, that we have a busted flush. If we went to the country, there would be a renewal. All the procedures are in place. We are waiting for Kelly. Other procedures have been put in place pro tem. There is nothing to prevent us from having an election as those other countries have recently had.

I urge hon. Members to think carefully about how they vote this evening. I urge Members on the Government Benches to join those of us who are democratically concerned about the future of this place, and to join us in the Lobby later.

6.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Chris Bryant): I apologise to the House for the fact that it is me replying to the debate, but I had been asked to do so before I was moved to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, so this is my sort of final appearance as the Deputy Leader of the House.

We had some interesting speeches this afternoon, and some that were fundamentally misleading. It is a shame that the—*[Interruption.]* Oh, no, the hon. Member for Moray (Angus Robertson) has been able to get back into the Chamber now. I disagreed with almost every word that he said, as I am sure he would expect. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) tried to patronise the Secretary of State for Wales, which is the hon. Gentleman's favourite tactic when he is rattled, but I thought that my right hon. Friend made a very good argument, and I hope to return to it.

We then had important contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire), who made some important points that needed to be heard about the Scottish nationalists' record. We also heard from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), whom I like to think of as an hon. Friend these days. When he was lying on top of me the other day—or I was lying on top of him, I cannot remember—on the rugby pitch at Twickenham, he impressed upon me the need for radical reform of Parliament, and, as he knows, I have always agreed with him on those matters.

We heard from the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), and he always speaks from the heart, with minimal notes and with great conviction. I do not happen to agree with the conclusions that he came to, and, as he knows, I often disagree with the conclusions that he comes to; none the less, I share with him the respect for this House and the importance of our being able to reinforce its value into the future and to restore the reputation in which it is held. He referred to several changes to the constitution which were brought about

[Chris Bryant]

in the 19th century. One of the most important changes, as far as the Rhondda was concerned, was when the franchise was extended to miners, and, from that day forward, they have had Labour representation.

We need to make further reforms, and the most important question that we need to consider when we consider whether to dissolve Parliament is whether there is anything that we—we—need to do urgently. I believe that there are two very important things that we need to do urgently.

I realise, however, that I have forgotten the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and his highly illuminating speech. He did, however, mislead us—inadvertently, I am sure—on one fact. He said that he thought that, one day, the Business Secretary, my Lord—[Hon. Members: "Aah!"] Well, the right hon. Gentleman said that the Business Secretary was going to be an archbishop, and, from my former career, I am used to calling archbishops "my Lord". I am sure, however, that he would not suffice with an archbishopric; after all, archbishops can be fallible.

Most importantly, there are significant things that we need to do as a Government. I believe, as all Members have said today, that we need to take very seriously the message that the electorate sent us last week—a message not only to my political party, but to all political parties represented in this Chamber. There was a significant fall in turnout in many areas and there was a vote for the far right in many areas. In my constituency, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats came in after the British National party. There are very important issues that we need to bear in mind; there are important reforms that we need to make to the way in which we do politics; and, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said, we need to make them urgently—very urgently. First, we need to have an independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, because it is important that we do not set our own pay and rations. Our pay, allowances and pensions should be set, monitored, audited and administered completely independently of this House. That they have not been is one of the major things that has brought this place into disrepute.

Nobody should be able to enrich themselves by virtue of being a Member of this House or by virtue of the allowances that they are able to claim. Nobody should be prevented, equally, from being a Member of this House because they do not have an independent fortune. Anybody should be able to represent a constituency in this country, regardless of their background. I note that the hon. Gentleman wants a swift timetable—and there will be one, to bring those reforms forward. We need to see them as swiftly as possible, and that means that it would be ludicrous and inappropriate for us to have a general election now. In addition, we need to make sure that the reassessment—and, if necessary, repayment—of all hon. Members' claims back to 2004 can be done swiftly. That would surely have to be done before any general election.

We need to look seriously at the issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister this afternoon about the reform of the House of Commons and its Committees. We all recognise the value of the Select Committee system, which has been around in a changing form for the past 25 or 30 years. However, we need to go a step further in making sure that those Committees have real power and an ability to transform the politics of this country. The changes to which my right hon. Friend referred this afternoon would help.

Likewise, we need to consider timetabling and how we conduct our business. We need to look at all such matters urgently if we are to make sure that the House, which has been respected around the country through the centuries, returns to that key position.

Mr. Heath: On the hon. Gentleman's earlier reference to Twickenham, I should say that I seem to remember being hurled rather forcibly by a second row forward at him, rather than simply collapsing on top of him. But that is not the point.

The hon. Gentleman is now articulating a raft of reforms that some Members, on both sides, have been advocating year after year—but those on the Treasury Bench have refused to accept them. Why should we believe now that there is a realistic timetable for introducing those reforms as a matter of urgency? If there is such a timetable, will he tell us precisely what it is?

Chris Bryant: As the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, some of the measures have not been around for ever and a day. Some of them have, and he also knows perfectly well that I have supported them; on many such issues, I have gone through the Lobby with the hon. Gentleman. One of the other issues is House of Lords reform. I believe that it is wrong for people who are not prepared to put themselves up for election to tell people in this country how to live their lives; that is why I believe in reform of the second Chamber.

The most dramatic urgency relates, however, to the issue of the independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. That has not arisen until recently, but we need to proceed with it as fast as we can. It is for my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House to inform the hon. Gentleman when that will happen, but I understand that this afternoon several hon. Members have been in cross-party talks about some of these measures. I hope that we will be able to move them forward as fast as possible.

It is vital that we continue urgent work on a second issue: the recession. Uniquely, it has hit the whole world, and profoundly so. When I was knocking on doors in my constituency during the elections last week, people were constantly raising issues about their family incomes, their savings, their jobs and their future prosperity. Those people would have been expecting the House to be debating such issues in substantial measure this afternoon. The truth is that this Government acted to shore up the banking system—not to protect bankers, but to make sure that individuals' deposits were protected. Otherwise, people would have lost all their savings.

This Government have been providing support for businesses, which can now defer their taxes at an important time in the economic cycle. We have introduced additional support for mortgage interest, reducing it for the unemployed so that it kicks in for mortgages of up to £200,000 rather than those up to £100,000—and after 13 weeks, not 39 weeks.

The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks did not mention any of those issues; he did not seem to have any interest in the economic situation. Like the Leader of the Opposition, he had no time to mention any

matters of substance. The issues that I have mentioned face our constituents, and we need to address them. So I say that now is not the time—

Sir Robert Smith *rose—*

Chris Bryant: No, I will not give way, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, because I have very little time.

I want to address some of the issues that have been raised by the nationalists. They pretend in political life, and yet we all know the truth that lies behind it. What is the truth in this case? They do not expect to form a Government if there is a general election. They are not intending to put up candidates across every seat in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. They have no intention of forming a Government of their own—they want to get rid of this Government to put in that lot, the Conservatives, and they should be honest to the House about it. *[Interruption.]* Yes, absolutely—the right hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) and his friends should look carefully at where they are getting the cheers from.

We know that that is the truth, because the nationalists have a record on this. Just look at 1979—they did exactly the same then. Look at 1993, when they propped up a discredited Government. The truth is that they are so obsessed with independence that that is the only thing they will ever see. Of course, the leader of their party—the leader in Scotland—could perfectly well have been in Scotland today voting on reform of the rape law; instead, he has decided to sit in here and smirk like a Cheshire cat so that he gets on television behind the leader of Plaid Cymru. Where were they when it came to the minimum wage? None of them even bothered to turn up, and yet they try to pretend that they believe in things—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order—the House must come to order. This debate is coming to an end, and Members who have been here throughout wish to hear the Minister's reply. There are far too many private conversations going on.

Chris Bryant: The truth of the matter is that the nationalists always vote with the Tories. Who was their latest Member to come into the House? I am glad to see him sitting there—the hon. Member for Glasgow, East (John Mason). In his first four votes, which Division lobby did he go through? Not through the lobby with the Labour party but through the lobby with the Conservatives. No wonder this year's Scottish Conservatives' conference programme said:

> "For the first time in more than a decade Conservative policies are being enacted—and it is here in Scotland."

Yes—Conservative policies are being enacted by the Scottish National party.

So we know that the nationalists like to ride in on the Conservatives' coat tails, but the Conservatives like to ride in on their coat tails as well. They do not table their own motion but come running along like Johnny-come-latelies after that little shower. I warn the Conservatives about the nationalists, because they do not share the same principles in some respects—the nationalists want to cut defence jobs in Scotland and in Wales. They want to see the end of Trident in Faslane. They do not support St. Athan and the new defence training academy in Wales, which would mean thousands of jobs in south Wales, including for people in my constituency. What are the nationalists in my constituency doing about armed forces day? They are saying that it is just a gimmick and they are not prepared to defend our armed forces.

On the economy, we know what—*[Interruption.]* I am about to come to the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Adam Price), so he can keep calm. What were his views, along with all the nationalists? They proclaimed the great arc of prosperity that was to extend across the smaller countries—Ireland, Iceland and Latvia. The hon. Gentleman said that

> "small country success is everywhere...Iceland...has a GDP per capita some £7,000 above Wales".

The reality now in Iceland is that inflation is running at 18 per cent. and its economy has shrunk by 10 per cent. So we know that the nationalists' policy on the economy is absolutely nowhere. They have no suggestions and no way of making sure that this country returns to economic strength—

Stewart Hosie *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 268, Noes 340.

Division No. 146] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr. Peter
Alexander, Danny
Amess, Mr. David
Ancram, rh Mr. Michael
Arbuthnot, rh Mr. James
Atkinson, Mr. Peter
Bacon, Mr. Richard
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Barker, Gregory
Baron, Mr. John
Barrett, John
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Benyon, Mr. Richard
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Binley, Mr. Brian
Blunt, Mr. Crispin
Bone, Mr. Peter
Boswell, Mr. Tim
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr. Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Mr. Julian
Breed, Mr. Colin
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr. Jeremy
Browning, Angela
Bruce, rh Malcolm
Burns, Mr. Simon
Burrowes, Mr. David
Burstow, Mr. Paul
Burt, Alistair
Butterfill, Sir John
Cameron, rh Mr. David
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
Carmichael, Mr. Alistair
Carswell, Mr. Douglas
Cash, Mr. William
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Clappison, Mr. James
Clark, Greg
Clarke, rh Mr. Kenneth
Clegg, rh Mr. Nick
Clifton-Brown, Mr. Geoffrey
Conway, Derek
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cox, Mr. Geoffrey
Crabb, Mr. Stephen
Curry, rh Mr. David
Davey, Mr. Edward
Davies, Mr. Dai
Davies, David T.C. *(Monmouth)*
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh David
Djanogly, Mr. Jonathan
Dodds, Mr. Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr. Jeffrey M.

Dorrell, rh Mr. Stephen
Dorries, Nadine
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr. Iain
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Ellwood, Mr. Tobias
Evans, Mr. Nigel
Evennett, Mr. David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr. Michael
Farron, Tim
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mr. Mark
Foster, Mr. Don
Fox, Dr. Liam
Francois, Mr. Mark
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Mr. Roger
Galloway, Mr. George
Garnier, Mr. Edward
Gauke, Mr. David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr. Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs. Cheryl
Goldsworthy, Julia
Goodman, Mr. Paul
Goodwill, Mr. Robert
Gove, Michael
Gray, Mr. James
Grayling, Chris
Green, Damian
Greening, Justine
Greenway, Mr. John
Grieve, Mr. Dominic
Gummer, rh Mr. John
Hague, rh Mr. William
Hammond, Mr. Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Mr. Mike
Hands, Mr. Greg
Harper, Mr. Mark
Harris, Dr. Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hayes, Mr. John
Heald, Mr. Oliver
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hemming, John
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, Nick
Hoban, Mr. Mark
Hogg, rh Mr. Douglas
Hollobone, Mr. Philip
Holloway, Mr. Adam
Holmes, Paul
Horam, Mr. John
Horwood, Martin
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Mr. Michael
Howarth, David
Howarth, Mr. Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, Simon
Huhne, Chris
Hunt, Mr. Jeremy
Hunter, Mark
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jackson, Mr. Stewart
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Jones, Mr. David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keetch, Mr. Paul
Kennedy, rh Mr. Charles
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Knight, rh Mr. Greg
Kramer, Susan
Laing, Mrs. Eleanor
Lait, Mrs. Jacqui
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mr. Mark
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Laws, Mr. David
Leech, Mr. John
Leigh, Mr. Edward
Letwin, rh Mr. Oliver
Lewis, Dr. Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr. Ian
Lilley, rh Mr. Peter
Llwyd, Mr. Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
Maclean, rh David
MacNeil, Mr. Angus
Main, Anne
Malins, Mr. Humfrey
Maples, Mr. John
Mason, John
Mates, rh Mr. Michael
Maude, rh Mr. Francis
May, rh Mrs. Theresa
McCrea, Dr. William
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr. Patrick
Mercer, Patrick
Miller, Mrs. Maria
Milton, Anne
Mitchell, Mr. Andrew
Moss, Mr. Malcolm
Mulholland, Greg
Mundell, David
Murrison, Dr. Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
O'Brien, Mr. Stephen
Oaten, Mr. Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Mr. George
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, Mr. James
Paterson, Mr. Owen
Pelling, Mr. Andrew
Penning, Mike
Penrose, John
Pickles, Mr. Eric
Prisk, Mr. Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, Dr. John
Randall, Mr. John
Reid, Mr. Alan
Rennie, Willie
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Robathan, Mr. Andrew
Robertson, Angus
Robertson, Hugh
Robertson, Mr. Laurence
Robinson, Mrs. Iris
Robinson, rh Mr. Peter
Rogerson, Dan
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowen, Paul
Ruffley, Mr. David
Russell, Bob
Salmond, rh Mr. Alex
Sanders, Mr. Adrian
Scott, Mr. Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Grant
Shepherd, Mr. Richard
Simmonds, Mark
Simpson, David
Simpson, Mr. Keith
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, Mr. Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs. Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spink, Bob
Spring, Mr. Richard
Steen, Mr. Anthony
Streeter, Mr. Gary
Stuart, Mr. Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Mr. Desmond
Swinson, Jo
Swire, Mr. Hugo
Syms, Mr. Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Mr. Ian
Teather, Sarah
Thurso, John
Timpson, Mr. Edward
Tredinnick, David
Turner, Mr. Andrew
Tyrie, Mr. Andrew
Vaizey, Mr. Edward
Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Viggers, Sir Peter
Villiers, Mrs. Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Wallace, Mr. Ben
Walter, Mr. Robert
Waterson, Mr. Nigel
Watkinson, Angela
Webb, Steve
Weir, Mr. Mike
Whittingdale, Mr. John
Widdecombe, rh Miss Ann
Wiggin, Bill
Willetts, Mr. David
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mark
Williams, Mr. Roger
Williams, Stephen
Willis, Mr. Phil
Willott, Jenny
Wilshire, Mr. David
Wilson, Mr. Rob
Winterton, Ann
Winterton, Sir Nicholas
Wright, Jeremy
Yeo, Mr. Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Younger-Ross, Richard

Tellers for the Ayes:
Pete Wishart and Adam Price

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, rh Mr. Bob
Alexander, rh Mr. Douglas
Allen, Mr. Graham
Anderson, Mr. David
Anderson, Janet
Armstrong, rh Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, Mr. Ian
Austin, John
Bailey, Mr. Adrian
Baird, Vera
Balls, rh Ed
Banks, Gordon
Barlow, Ms Celia
Barron, rh Mr. Kevin
Battle, rh John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Sir Stuart
Benn, rh Hilary
Benton, Mr. Joe
Berry, Roger
Betts, Mr. Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blackman-Woods, Dr. Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blizzard, Mr. Bob
Blunkett, rh Mr. David
Borrow, Mr. David S.
Bradshaw, Mr. Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr. Nicholas
Brown, Mr. Russell
Browne, rh Des
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnham, rh Andy
Byers, rh Mr. Stephen
Byrne, rh Mr. Liam
Caborn, rh Mr. Richard
Cairns, David
Campbell, Mr. Alan
Campbell, Mr. Ronnie
Clinton, Mr. Martin
Cawsey, Mr. Ian
Chapman, Ben
Chaytor, Mr. David
Clapham, Mr. Michael
Clark, Ms Katy
Clark, Paul
Clarke, rh Mr. Charles
Clarke, rh Mr. Tom
Clelland, Mr. David
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Mr. Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, Mr. David

Creagh, Mary
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, Mrs. Ann
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Mr. Jim
Cunningham, Tony
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs. Claire
Darling, rh Mr. Alistair
David, Mr. Wayne
Davidson, Mr. Ian
Davies, Mr. Quentin
Dean, Mrs. Janet
Denham, rh Mr. John
Dhanda, Mr. Parmjit
Dismore, Mr. Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, rh Frank
Donohoe, Mr. Brian H.
Doran, Mr. Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, Mr. David
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs. Louise
Engel, Natascha
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr. Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Mr. Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Mr. Michael *(Worcester)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings and Rye)*
Francis, Dr. Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, rh Mr. Bruce
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Gilroy, Linda
Godsiff, Mr. Roger
Goggins, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Nigel
Grogan, Mr. John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr. Peter
Hall, Mr. Mike
Hall, Patrick
Hamilton, Mr. David
Hamilton, Mr. Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr. David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr. Tom
Havard, Mr. Dai
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Mr. Doug
Hendrick, Mr. Mark
Hepburn, Mr. Stephen
Heppell, Mr. John
Hermon, Lady
Hesford, Stephen
Heyes, David
Hill, rh Keith
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs. Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Mr. Jim
Hoon, rh Mr. Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr. George
Howells, rh Dr. Kim
Hoyle, Mr. Lindsay
Hughes, rh Beverley
Humble, Mrs. Joan
Hutton, rh Mr. John
Iddon, Dr. Brian
Illsley, Mr. Eric
Ingram, rh Mr. Adam
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs. Siân C.
Jenkins, Mr. Brian
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Ms Diana R.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr. Kevan
Jones, Lynne
Jones, Mr. Martyn
Jowell, rh Tessa
Joyce, Mr. Eric
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keeley, Barbara
Keen, Alan
Keen, Ann
Kelly, rh Ruth
Kemp, Mr. Fraser
Kennedy, rh Jane
Khan, Mr. Sadiq
Kidney, Mr. David
Kilfoyle, Mr. Peter
Knight, rh Jim
Ladyman, Dr. Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Laxton, Mr. Bob
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony
Love, Mr. Andrew
Lucas, Ian
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, rh Mr. Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mallaber, Judy
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr. Gordon
Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Robert
Martlew, Mr. Eric
McAvoy, rh Mr. Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Chris
McCarthy, Kerry
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
McCartney, rh Mr. Ian
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, Dr. Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr. Pat
McFall, rh John
McGovern, Mr. Jim
McGuire, rh Mrs. Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKechin, Ann
McKenna, Rosemary
McNulty, rh Mr. Tony
Meacher, rh Mr. Michael
Meale, Mr. Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, rh Alun
Milburn, rh Mr. Alan
Miliband, rh David
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Mr. Austin
Moffat, Anne
Moffatt, Laura
Mole, Chris
Moon, Mrs. Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Julie
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, Mr. George
Mullin, Mr. Chris
Munn, Meg
Murphy, Mr. Denis
Murphy, rh Mr. Jim
Murphy, rh Mr. Paul
Naysmith, Dr. Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mr. Mike
O'Hara, Mr. Edward
Olner, Mr. Bill
Osborne, Sandra
Owen, Albert
Palmer, Dr. Nick
Pearson, Ian
Plaskitt, Mr. James
Pope, Mr. Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Bridget
Prentice, Mr. Gordon
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Primarolo, rh Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Mr. Ken
Purnell, rh James
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, rh Mr. Nick
Reed, Mr. Andy
Reed, Mr. Jamie
Reid, rh John
Riordan, Mrs. Linda
Robertson, John
Robinson, Mr. Geoffrey
Rooney, Mr. Terry
Roy, Mr. Frank
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Christine
Ryan, rh Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mr. Mohammad
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr. Virendra
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Mr. Barry
Sheridan, Jim
Simon, Mr. Siôn
Simpson, Alan
Singh, Mr. Marsha
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Slaughter, Mr. Andy
Smith, rh Mr. Andrew
Smith, Ms Angela C. *(Sheffield, Hillsborough)*
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Smith, Geraldine
Smith, rh Jacqui
Smith, John
Snelgrove, Anne
Soulsby, Sir Peter
Southworth, Helen
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Starkey, Dr. Phyllis
Stewart, Ian
Stoate, Dr. Howard
Strang, rh Dr. Gavin
Straw, rh Mr. Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Taylor, Ms Dari
Taylor, David
Taylor, Dr. Richard
Thomas, Mr. Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mr. Mark
Touhig, rh Mr. Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr. Desmond
Turner, Mr. Neil
Twigg, Derek
Ussher, Kitty
Vis, Dr. Rudi
Walley, Joan
Waltho, Lynda
Ward, Claire
Wareing, Mr. Robert N.
Watson, Mr. Tom
Watts, Mr. Dave
Whitehead, Dr. Alan
Wicks, rh Malcolm
Williams, rh Mr. Alan
Williams, Mrs. Betty
Wills, rh Mr. Michael
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr. David
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Wood, Mike
Woodward, rh Mr. Shaun
Woolas, Mr. Phil
Wright, Mr. Anthony
Wright, David
Wright, Mr. Iain
Wright, Dr. Tony
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Tami and
Ms Dawn Butler

Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

European Communities

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (Maritime Labour Convention) Order 2009, which was laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.—*(David Wright.)*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)).

Minimum Stock of Crude Oil And/or Petroleum Products

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 15910/08 and Addenda 1 and 2, draft Council Directive on Minimum stocks of crude oil and/or petroleum products; and supports the Government's approach to secure practical and proportionate legislation for oil stocking to ensure the availability of oil stocks in a crisis across EU Member States.—*(David Wright.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)).

External Service

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 5289/09, Commission Communication on the Development and Consolidation of the External Service: Implementation of Measures for 2008; and endorses the Government's policy of support for the developments to the European Commission's external service in 2009.—*(David Wright.)*

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 17 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

PETITION

Planning and Development (Somerset)

7.18 pm

Mr. Jeremy Browne (Taunton) (LD): The petition is from people who wish to stop the over-development in Taunton Deane. They realise that some extra development is desirable, particularly of affordable housing, but the level of development envisaged is excessive.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the Taunton constituency and others,

Declares that the Petitioners are extremely concerned that the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West requires the creation of 21,800 new homes in Taunton Deane within the next 20 years; and notes that the residents of Taunton Deane have had no recourse to decide on the suitability of the plan locally despite the significant impact such large scale development will have on living standards in the local area.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reassess its commitment to the over development of Taunton Deane and bring forward a revised option which strikes a more appropriate balance between the need for greater affordable housing and the quality of life in Taunton Deane.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P000381]

School Nurture Groups

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(David Wright.)*

7.20 pm

Mr. Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to her new position on the Front Bench. As someone who was elected alongside her in 2005, I know she is one of the brightest and best on the Labour Benches. I trust and believe she will do a superb job in the role she has been given.

I pay tribute to this Government's record in improving education across the board in my constituency and in west Cumbria as a whole. The fact that attainment levels at primary and secondary schools have improved significantly since 1997 is beyond any significant doubt. In the town of Egremont in my constituency, the Government have responded to my calls for individual and specific initiatives by investing almost £30 million in the new West Lakes academy school, which is soon to begin construction; by agreeing to allocate a further £80 million of capital expenditure on secondary schools in the area; and through other routes, such as funding for the first time in the history of west Cumbria not only the university of Cumbria, but the university of Central Lancashire and the university of Manchester's Dalton facility—both at the Westlake science park. In addition, Sure Start centres in my constituency have been an unqualified success.

It is, however, a matter of profound regret to me and all those who care about the life chances of future generations of west Cumbrian children that the Opposition have promised to abolish Sure Start centres and slash education spending by billions should they ever form a Government. Let me be absolutely clear that the public funds being put into education in west Cumbria and my constituency in particular are without any precedent. Labour Governments make these investments because we understand the true power of education. It is through education that society is strengthened, that individuals prosper and that most of the ills facing us as a society can be cured.

Undoubtedly, it is through the distribution of knowledge and learning that we really redistribute wealth, and that we really redistribute power and opportunity, and it is through education that we will eradicate poverty in this country. I mean not just physical or economic poverty, but the toxic and uniquely contagious poverty of ambition and aspiration that still blights so many of our communities. That is why nurture groups are so incredibly important.

As someone who has entered public life, like the Minister, with the determination to achieve those ends, I have seen just how important nurture groups are, where they exist, in helping to achieve those policy objectives. Nurture groups provide effective support for vulnerable children and young people who experience barriers to their learning for a variety of social, emotional and academic reasons. Nurture groups help children to succeed: they improve attendance, engage parents in their child's education and build confidence and self-esteem. None of us can doubt that for our children to succeed, they must first know what success is.

Nurture groups have been in existence for 40 years, with a proven track record of success, and can also be found in countries such as New Zealand and Canada. There are more than 1,000 nurture groups in the UK, funded variously by local authorities, schools and charitable donations. As far as I am aware, no nurture groups are funded directly by central Government or by additional grants to local education authorities—a situation that in my view should change as soon as possible, irrespective of the straitened economic times in which we find ourselves.

Nurture groups cover a variety of children from different social and economic backgrounds and with different educational attainment levels and abilities. There is no typical child for whom a nurture group is suitable. Rather, it is progressive teachers in supported and supportive professional environments who identify the need for nurture groups in their schools and who in turn identify those children who would benefit most from a period of nurture.

As matters stand, the existence of nurture groups in schools in my constituency and across the country is testimony to the professional excellence demonstrated by so many of our teachers—people such as Pamela Telford and Ann Banks at Monkwray primary school, and Pauline Lambert and Lynne McQuire at Millom infants. Kells infants and Valley primary, too, have seen the need for these groups, and across west Cumbria, Wendy Roden, Leesa Taylor, John Kirk and others have undertaken unique work. These are people who believe passionately in their own ability and in the power of education to change the lives of individuals and to improve their communities and society—and they do not and will not wait for other agencies or other people to identify problems and produce solutions. Nor should they. In short, as happens with so many successes, they have chosen not to wait for politicians to get around to solving the problems that they see daily, but to take the necessary action themselves. In my view, that initiative should be rewarded with fixed, stable funding, and the best practice with which those people are associated should be shared nationally.

Like the Minister, I entered politics to improve the lives of my constituents, to open the doors of opportunity, and to prioritise my efforts in favour of those who need help the most. I have seen hundreds of examples of improved public services in my constituency in recent years. I have seen new dialysis units, new emergency medicine centres, new classrooms and more, and I care passionately about them all. I have also recently visited a number of nurture groups in my constituency, and I can say without exaggeration that I have never been as moved or convinced by the need for any public service.

I have seen the lives of children being changed in front of my face. I have seen the life chances of some children unfold and expand as I have been in the classroom, and I have never seen anything like it in any school environment. At one school in my constituency, I met a little girl who used the nurture group dressing-up box to dress as a princess. The teacher gave her and other classmates a digital camera. They would take photographs, print them and display them in the classroom. The teacher told me that only weeks earlier, the little girl in question kept asking the teacher and classmates who the pretty girl in the photograph was. She could not recognise herself. She had no sense of self—no awareness of herself—and it took weeks to convince her that the girl in the photograph actually was her. As soon as that knowledge took hold, her life was changed.

[Mr. Jamie Reed]

I have never seen pride like the pride that I saw in that little girl's face when she showed me the photographs of herself. I can only compare it to watching a butterfly emerge from a chrysalis. The girl did not have an easy family background. Her parents themselves had not enjoyed what could be termed a rewarding experience in education. However, the change in their daughter changed the family. I have seen children transformed by specialist care, not just emotionally but educationally.

At every school that I have visited where these groups exist, not just the children but their parents receive the nurture that they need, and the life-changing support that, for some reason, they do not receive anywhere else. The same can be said of male pupils. I have seen primary and junior school boys win competition prizes, only to find that they are incapable—physically incapable—of accepting those prizes, along with the plaudits and congratulations that they deserve. They refuse to make eye contact.

I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) is present. He shares a constituency boundary with me, and he will be aware of what is happening in our part of the world.

What I have described does not happen only occasionally. It happens regularly, but it does not have to be this way. It is just as important to recognise that such behaviour can develop into a culture if it is left unattended in significant numbers of children. Tragically, a generational cycle can develop. There is enough qualitative evidence to demonstrate such an issue in communities throughout the country, particularly those that have been scarred by the brutal economic transitions of the 1980s.

As children in nurture groups learn academically and socially, they develop confidence, become responsive to others, and take pride in behaving well and in achievement. Usually after less than three school terms, more than 80 per cent. are ready to return full time to the mainstream class with which they will have kept in daily contact. When that is not possible, children are still helped by their time in nurture groups. The nature of their difficulties is better understood by their teachers, and the special help that they need can be identified and sought. This is a move that is usually welcomed by parents who have seen their children's particular educational needs become apparent.

The House should not just take my word for it, however. In April this year, Sir Alan Steer recognised the importance of nurture groups in his report "Learning Behaviour: Lessons learned. A review of behaviour standards and practices in our schools". His report contained the following recommendation:

> "Head teachers report that nurture groups can be important in supporting pupils who display poor behaviour. Building on previous research DCSF should undertake an assessment of the impact of nurture groups in schools situated in areas of high deprivation. This might be via an Ofsted survey of the effectiveness of nurture groups and other additional provision in schools that supports good behaviour, an independent evaluation, or a pilot programme which could be evaluated by Ofsted".

I agree with Sir Alan. Moreover, I believe that the evidence in support of these groups is overwhelming.

Pulling policy levers in Whitehall will not by itself deliver the same kind of results that I have seen nurture groups achieve on the ground in our communities, on our streets, and in hearts and minds where it matters most. Having achieved so much, our Government should harness these energies and enable them to flourish further with the predictable funding they now need. Ultimately, if we do not do this—if this Government and our party do not do this—no one else will. I will therefore now write to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State to ask them to include a commitment to nurture groups in the next Labour party manifesto.

More importantly, I shall now make some specific requests of the Minister and her Department. Will her Department now make dedicated financial provision for the funding of nurture groups wherever they are required? Will her Department now undertake a national study or a series of pilot studies where nurture groups exist in areas of social deprivation? Will representatives of her Department meet with the Nurture Group Network to discuss its work and how best to take this forward? Finally, will the Minister please come and see for herself the remarkable results achieved by nurture groups in my constituency? Raised attainment levels, record numbers of new schools, dramatically improved pay and conditions for teachers, an information and communications technology revolution, record numbers of people in education and university, and the magnificent work of our Sure Start centres: this is a record to be proud of, and that nobody else would be capable of. Let us finish the job, however; let us now give our nurture groups the support they deserve.

7.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Ms Diana R. Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr. Reed) on securing the debate, and I thank him for his very kind words at the start of his speech.

I know from my hon. Friend's eloquent speech this evening that he shares my commitment to excellence in education and is dedicated to ensuring the very best provision for the children and young people of his constituency. The topic of this debate is of the utmost importance to this Government, because we have made a promise that we are going to make this the best country in the world for children to grow up in. That means not only offering young people the best education possible, but ensuring their welfare at every stage.

As we outlined in Every Child Matters, we want children's lives to be happy, healthy and safe. That is why our Department is revolutionising the way that children are looked after in and out of school. This is crucial not only to a child's broader development, but to their educational attainment. If a child feels happy, secure and safe, they are more likely to come to school ready to learn. Schools now work more closely with health services, police and the voluntary sector than ever before to make sure that every aspect of children's well-being is supported. Importantly, Every Child Matters gave the opportunity for children and parents to have their thoughts and concerns heard by the Government, so we could construct the safest and most effective ways to meet the needs of every child and every parent. Putting the voice of the child and young person at the heart of the debate so it informs everything we do is absolutely essential if services are truly to meet their needs.

The children's plan has taken that even further, setting out a vision for greater partnerships between schools and children services. We now have more than 3,000 Sure Start centres, offering practical advice and support for both families and children. More schools than ever before are offering extended services to meet the wider needs of children, including breakfast clubs, study support groups and easier access to specialist services for those who need extra support. We want to meet the needs of every child, to help them achieve their best. The Labour Government have a proud record on this, which stands up to independent scrutiny and will certainly be under threat if there is a change of Government.

We know that what happens to a child in the first few years of life has a huge effect on their future development and life chances, so making sure that every child's needs are met as soon as they start primary school is of utmost importance. When children are experiencing difficulties, early intervention is vital. As my hon. Friend set out so effectively, nurture groups support children who are showing signs of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. They are a place where pupils can spend all or most of the day, normally over a period of no longer than a year. They can create a predictable and secure environment for children to engage with their learning and to overcome their behavioural problems. As they begin to improve, they will gradually spend more and more time in mainstream classes until they can be fully integrated again into a typical classroom.

Nurture groups are not new, and indeed the Department has recognised their valuable contribution to the well-being of pupils for some time. The 1997 Green Paper "Excellence for All" set out a programme for improving special educational needs provision. In particular, it said that nurture groups offer a promising approach to the education of children with learning difficulties. Since then, the groups have flourished all over the country, and we have heard this evening about those in my hon. Friend's constituency.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, nurture groups were an essential part of Sir Alan Steer's final report on behaviour, published in April this year, in which he recognised the importance of early intervention in raising behaviour standards in schools. He recommended that we undertake an assessment of the impact of nurture groups in areas of high deprivation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made a commitment to act on all the recommendations in Sir Alan's report and we intend to publish our detailed implementation plan later this summer. I hope that that answers the particular question that my hon. Friend posed at the end of his speech.

There are, of course, other effective ways that behavioural and emotional problems can be addressed across the whole school, so that all children can understand the importance of managing their behaviour. That is because behavioural problems can have a knock-on effect on all students and staff, not just the individuals concerned. Students need to learn to be able to value and respect their teachers and one another so that good manners can go beyond the classroom, out into the corridor and into the playground.

Our social and emotional aspects of learning programme—or SEAL—develops the social and emotional skills of all pupils through a whole-school approach, across the curriculum. It is designed to develop pupils' sense of self-awareness and the ability to manage their feelings in a constructive and positive way. By developing empathy, social awareness, motivation and social skills, it enables them to get along better with others and to become more responsible citizens. SEAL helps schools to create a safe and emotionally healthy school environment where pupils can learn effectively. Through well-crafted assemblies, informed lesson plans and colourful source material, primary schoolchildren are able to identify with their emotions and understand that the way in which they express their feelings can affect their fellow pupils. Its effects can be felt in the corridors as well as the classroom.

If we get children off on the right foot at the very start of their school careers, their emotional well-being can develop in parallel with their educational achievements. These skills are an important component of personal, social and health education, helping pupils to become responsible citizens. Such an approach has worked well for many schools, and about 80 per cent. of primary schools now use the SEAL programme. My Department is committed to ensuring that such skills are addressed in every school, and we provide £10 million a year to local authorities to fund training in SEAL for school staff. We have also decided to make personal, social, health and economic education—PSHE—a statutory subject to be taught to all children, including primary schoolchildren.

Children will one day leave school and start work in the wider world, where social skills are the glue that holds down a good job, rewarding friendships, a roof over their head and a steady source of income. Teaching PSHE in the classroom allows pupils to see the benefits of applying these skills to their current lives, and puts them on the right track for life. I hope that that goes some way to persuading my hon. Friend that we are not complacent when it comes to effective ways to improve pupils' behaviour and social skills.

My hon. Friend asked specifically about direct funding. As I have explained, money is already provided for the SEAL programme, but there is no specific central funding for nurture groups. By law, local authorities must of course provide a fair and equal education to all children in their local area, regardless of their social and economic background, but it is for each local authority to decide how best to meet that duty. Local authorities receive money from the Government through the dedicated schools grant for school funding, which takes into account issues such as social deprivation. We have committed to supply £28.9 billion of funding this academic [illegible] to local authorities through the grant, and Cumbria's share of the funding was £258.7 million.

I know that Cumbria local authority have provided pump-priming funding and infrastructure support to schools looking to develop nurture groups, as well as professional development and support for school staff. As we have heard tonight, the groups are having a positive effect on the behaviour of pupils. There is no reason why other local authorities that want to support nurture groups cannot follow the good example of Cumbria.

We encourage local authorities to discuss their ideas with schools, governors and parents to decide what is best for the schools in their local area. That is what our Department means when we talk about the 21st-century school: a community coming together to work out the best way to reach the needs of their local pupils.

[Ms Diana R. Johnson]

It is for each local authority to determine what provision best meets the needs of the children in their local area, together with parents, teachers and pupils. Nurture groups have a real role to play in getting children back into the classroom, back into learning and back on track, but they are not the only answer and local authorities need the flexibility to make decisions about where they direct their funding to the benefit of all children in their area.

It is not just the responsibility of the local authority to ensure that children's well-being and wider development are supported, that they have the right support around them from education and children's services alike, and that they have the right sort of support. That is everybody's responsibility—it is the responsibility of central Government, local government, children's services professionals, teachers, heads, parents and even pupils. By working together in partnership to make the most of every resource our communities have to offer local children and parents, we will realise the vision of a world-class education system, first-class children's services and a generation of adults who are skilled workers, responsible citizens and well-rounded individuals.

Finally, I would be delighted to meet the Nurture Group Network. I would also very much like to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and to see nurture groups in operation.

Question put and agreed to.

7.42 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 11 June 2009

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. Speaker *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Committee of Selection

Ordered,

That Claire Ward be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Helen Jones be added to the Committee. *(Mr. McAvoy.)*

Independent Review of Home Education

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report, dated 11 June 2009, of the Independent Review of Home Education. *(Mr. Heppell.)*

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

The Minister of State was asked—

Human Tissue Legislation

1. **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): If he will direct the Office for Life Sciences to review the arrangements for pharmaceutical and medical biotech businesses to access samples of human tissue. [279888]

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): The Human Tissue Authority is currently assessing the impact of human tissue legislation and regulation on tissue-based research. This is of course primarily a matter for the Department of Health.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Minister for that reply, but lack of access to human tissue samples is impeding research in the fight against cancer and other diseases. Most human tissue removed in surgeries is currently incinerated, but with patient consent it can be put to very good use. Will the Minister ask the Office for Life Sciences to look into creating a database to record what samples are available where across the country to help academics and biotech companies to achieve scientific breakthroughs?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Lady is right that bioscience is hugely important. For research on Alzheimer's, Parkinson's disease and schizophrenia, access to human tissue can mean real advances. The Office for Life Sciences is co-ordinating activity and I am pleased that the Department of Health is among the group of Departments represented. She will also be aware that in March this year the HTA announced a project to assess the impact of tissue legislation and regulation on tissue-based research.

Extremist Activity (University Campuses)

2. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the levels of extremist activity on university campuses; and if he will make a statement. [279889]

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): The assessment of the law enforcement agencies is that there is some extremist activity on a small number of campuses. Where it occurs it is serious, but the assessment is that it is not widespread. Following the issuing of guidance to universities on this matter last year, we continue to work with the higher education sector to help it to reduce the risk of extremist activity on its campuses and to protect the safety of students and staff.

Andrew Rosindell: According to the British high commission in Pakistan, half of those granted student visas go missing when they come to the United Kingdom. What discussions is the Minister having with universities and the authorities to ensure that that ends, and ends soon?

Mr. Lammy: I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that there has been a change to the visa regime, which means that so-called bogus colleges have largely been closed down over the past year. Now, only 1,600 colleges have been granted a registration, compared with 4,000 previously. I am in regular discussion with my colleague in the Home Office, and the hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Affairs Committee is also looking into the issue. My colleague in this Department and my hon. Friend the Minister for Borders and Immigration will give evidence before it.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer, but I gently suggest that his civil servants might be allowing him to become a little complacent. If he talks to Jewish students about the intimidation on campuses earlier this year, in which Islamist organisations fuelled by outsiders intimidated Jewish students, not allowing them to meet or make their case, he will learn that it was a grave and worrying moment. Will he meet a delegation from the Union of Jewish Students and the Community Security Trust to discuss these issues? We cannot allow the notion that there is no problem to gain ground.

Mr. Lammy: I have already met the Union of Jewish Students and I have set up a group within the Department that includes representatives from the universities to discuss these issues. We will meet regularly to continue to make an assessment of the anti-Semitism that can exist on campuses and to do all the appropriate work to minimise those threats and those issues for Jewish students. That kind of xenophobia and racism have no place in the national life of this country.

Small Businesses

3. **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): What plans he has to reduce the level of regulation on small businesses. [279890]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Ian Lucas): Since 2005, we have reduced the administrative burden on business by £1.9 billion and are on track to deliver our promise of a 25 per cent. reduction worth £3.4 billion by 2010. We plan to adopt new simplification targets for 2010 to 2015 which will address regulatory costs for all businesses, but especially small businesses.

Mr. Bellingham: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his appointment and promotion, which were well deserved. He has always taken an interest in small businesses. He will be aware that the First Secretary has made a number of encouragingly pro-business speeches recently. In fact, he said that both the Government and Europe should get off the back of small businesses. He seemed to be implying that the Government now want to come out of the EU social chapter. Is that the case? Will the Minister also confirm that it is still his Department's intention strongly to resist the job-destroying agency workers directive?

Ian Lucas: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words, which are greatly appreciated. I ran a small business myself for a period and I know the importance of good regulation for small businesses. Some regulation is good, but the Government are keen to reduce and eliminate unnecessary regulation. The type of regulation that is acceptable to the Government should support workers. The minimum wage is a form of regulation of which we are very proud. We all support that type of good regulation, but we will always eliminate bad regulation. We are always listening to businesses to hear what they have to say, so that we can do that as often as possible.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone) (Lab): As my hon. Friend will be aware, reducing the imposition of regulation on small business is important, but another important factor is ensuring that finance is available for small businesses. He is aware that the enterprise finance guarantee is working well and is getting money for small businesses to where it should be. Is he satisfied that there is sufficient money in that scheme to ensure that, as we are at the turning point of the recession, the vital resource of money for small businesses will be available for some time to come?

Ian Lucas: It is, of course, extremely important that such finance is available for small business. I noted, as I sat as a Whip in the Chamber, how the Opposition have stopped talking about the ineffectiveness of so-called Government schemes. Those schemes are working. It is always important to listen to business and to hear what it has to say about the availability of resources. If there are shortages, we will certainly listen to what small businesses have to say.

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): May I, for the second time in less than 24 hours, congratulate and welcome the Minister and extend that welcome to the rest of his ministerial colleagues on the front Bench, pausing only to regret that the majority of the team—and its most powerful members—sit in another place? I invite him to reassure the House of the Department's commitment to regulatory reform, and particularly to the deregulation of small businesses. I urge him to reconsider the provisions of my private Member's Bill, which would remove the requirement for a small business to apply for rate relief so that it would be applied automatically, instead. I withdrew that Bill voluntarily on the basis of assurances from the Government that, to be honest, have not been met.

Ian Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his kind words. As I mentioned previously, I ran a small business, so I know the frustrations caused to businesses by the imposition of what they perceive as unnecessary regulation. I can assure him that I will do all I can to remove unnecessary regulation for small businesses, because I bear the scars of having to go through lots of forms that I could not understand.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to a key role in the empire of Mandelsonia. It is good to see him on the Front Bench.

In tracking the concerns of small businesses, we are seeing the cost of compliance moving up their list, and that is a worry to many who recognise the role of small businesses in creating most of the jobs that will pull us out of recession over the next 18 months. Will he assure the House that the dropping of regulatory reform from the original title of one of the component Departments does not mean that there will be a relaxation of attention on this important area for small and medium-sized enterprises?

Ian Lucas: As the Minister responsible for regulatory reform, I can assure him that I do not intend that its importance should drop in any way. It is a vital part of creating a more efficient and competitive economy and I will do all I can to take the agenda forward.

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I, too, welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box. I lose track, but I think that he is the seventh or eighth Minister whom I have shadowed in the last few years and I genuinely hope that he lasts longer than his predecessors.

Despite the Minister's claims and his welcome experience in small business, red tape is strangling enterprise. Let me give him an example. To install new microgeneration technologies in this country, a business must comply with not one, two or even three regulators but five separate regulators, three of whom make separate charges. Is that burden of regulation intentional, or is it just the result of ministerial incompetence?

Ian Lucas: It is never the Government's intention to create difficulties for anyone. Our intention is to make progress. I should be very glad to have more information about the specific example to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, and I shall gladly look into it. I thank him for his kind words, and assure him that I intend to be here for a very long time.

Scientific Research

4. **Dr. Evan Harris** (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): How much funding his Department is providing for scientific research in 2009-10. [27993]

The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr. Pat McFadden): My Department will invest some £5.5 billion in research funding in 2009-10. This is made up of the science research budget, which will reach almost £4 billion next year, and the Higher Education Funding Council quality-related research grants.

Dr. Harris: The Minister will recognise that science is long term and involves dedication. Does he accept that there is consternation in the science community that, since the latest reshuffle, neither of the words "universities" or "science" appears in the name of his Department? Moreover, the Science Minister and the Secretary of State are both in the House of Lords and therefore unaccountable to this House. The Science Minister is also forced to take on defence duties as well, and there is a real fear that the needs of strategic, long-term science will be subordinate to business. How can he reassure the science community on all those points?

Mr. McFadden: I am afraid that I must disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I believe that our Science Minister brings an enormous wealth of expertise from his industrial background that is to the advantage of both the country and the Government. As for the Department, it makes absolute sense to bring together our leading-edge scientific research and support for business and the fields of higher and further education. The economic situation that we face requires all those things to be brought together, in the interests of scientific research and the country's economic future.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that the investment in science that the Government have made in the north-west of England has paid real dividends, in that it has attracted high-quality science and protected and developed businesses at the leading edge of our economy. Will he assure the House that investment will continue to be made outside the golden triangle of the south-east, and that there will be real investment in science in the regions?

Mr. McFadden: The investment over recent years in the north-west has been extremely welcome, and is a reflection of the fact that the science budget has trebled since 1997. We have maintained our commitment to the science budget, and that stands in contrast to the signals given yesterday, when we were told that the Opposition are planning a 10 per cent. cut across the board in such funding. The sort of choice that the country will face in respect of science funding is therefore quite clear.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire) (Con): May I return to the point made by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris)? Notwithstanding the Minister's proper defence of the Science Minister's credentials, will he accept that there is very real consternation in the universities in general, and the science community in particular, about the fact that the words "universities" and "science" have been deleted from the name of this mega-Department? What can he do truly to reassure us?

Mr. McFadden: The hon. Gentleman has been in the House a very long time, and I have to remind him that it is not unknown for science to be a responsibility of this Department. That was the case until a couple of years ago, so I do not see the need for consternation about its return to the Department. That synergy was there before, and it will still be here in the future.

Mr. Andy Reed (Loughborough) (Lab/Co-op): The leading scientific research undertaken at places like Loughborough university, and the development of resulting products, will be vital if we are to bring our economy out of the current recession. However, although the global figures always sound impressive, is my hon. Friend aware that there is often a shortfall at local level in the amount of funding available for the development of leading scientific projects, and especially for bringing them forward to market? Will he ensure that greater emphasis is placed in future on those technologies that will make a real impact on the economic situation of the east midlands region as a whole? Will he argue the case that, far from being reduced, funding should be increased, as the technologies being developed will create jobs both locally and internationally?

Mr. McFadden: I know that my hon. Friend is a real champion of science funding, research and educational opportunity. His point about the application of science and bringing research to market is well made. We are hugely committed to that. It is one reason we have backed the science budget and why it is in such a different state today from the science budget that we inherited when we came into office. I assure him that that commitment will remain in the future.

Stephen Williams (Bristol, West) (LD): May I welcome the Minister for Business to his wider range of responsibilities? Of course, investment in science, technology, engineering, maths, and also in the arts and humanities for the digital economy, is essential if we are to emerge from the recession even stronger. In just a matter of weeks, there will be hundreds of thousands of graduates leaving our universities in the bleakest job market for a generation. Now is an ideal time to expand the research opportunities for them, so that they can learn, invest and build our future, rather than have a taste of the dole queue.

Mr. McFadden: We are acutely aware of the graduates who will come out of universities in the coming months. The predecessor Department, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, announced measures on the expansion of internships and so on to try to expand opportunity for people in that position. I quite agree with him that research should not just be about science; we have also expanded funding to the economic and social research budget, which has gone up from £105 million in 2004-05 to £166 million in the last financial year. Once again, there is a stark contrast between that commitment, and pledges for a 10 per cent. cut across the board from the Conservative party.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller), one of the key areas in the north-west for science development is the Daresbury laboratory and business park. Its output is key to science, invention and research and to products being brought to market. It is key to have the space and the willingness to develop that through factories and other facilities. There is an important point to be made about Daresbury:

it is one of the key areas in the country with the room to do that. I ask my right hon. Friend to make sure that he keeps that in mind when he is looking at funding for science, as Daresbury science and business park is one of the key areas in the country for that.

Mr. McFadden: My hon. Friend makes his point very well. The excellence at Daresbury is well recognised. I know that he is a strong advocate for it, and I can assure him that that is understood in Government. His points about the spin-offs and benefits from that are absolutely correct.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): There are clearly many unanswered questions about science funding in the future. Just two years ago, the Prime Minister announced with a great fanfare that he was creating a new Department called the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, which basically separated science from business, yet less than two years later he has abandoned that new Department and taken us back to the future, with all the resultant costs and confusion. The question is: was he wrong back then, or is he wrong today? Like Thomas More, I see no further alternative.

Mr. McFadden: I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman has been living for the past two years, but I have to tell him that there have been some changes in the economy in that period. We face a worldwide economic downturn, and in those circumstances it makes absolute sense to bring together science, business, and higher and further education. We now have a Department in which educational opportunity, science and innovation and support for business all work together for the benefit of the country's economy. That can only be a good thing, and I would have hoped that he supported it. Perhaps he should address his concerns to his party's Treasury spokespeople, given the 10 per cent. cut in the Department's budget that his party would make if it had its way.

Further Education Colleges

5. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What estimate he has made of the costs incurred by further education colleges in seeking (a) application in principle and (b) application in detail status for the capital expenditure programmes. [279004]

The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs (Kevin Brennan): The Learning and Skills Council and independent property consultants are working with colleges to understand the extent of the costs. Until that work is completed we will not know the exact expenditure that colleges have incurred, but no college that has acted reasonably will be left unable to meet its financial obligations relating to that matter.

John Howell: How many colleges have had to abandon building projects over the past nine months, and what impact will that have on their ability to cut costs to meet Treasury efficiency targets?

Kevin Brennan: It is important to acknowledge the concern felt as a result of what happened, the fact that there was a review subsequently, and the fact that there is a process in place through which colleges will receive decisions in a way that is objective and meets the priorities involved. It is also important to remember that we are talking about not whether, but how investment will be made. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman could pledge that his party will meet the investment in further education that this Government are promising.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend knows that his new Department will be judged on how well it does its job, so may I urge him to prioritise the decisions on colleges? When a constituency college of mine, Kirklees college, Huddersfield, took over the failing Dewsbury college, it was given clear promises that it would have a rebuilding scheme. It has been delayed and delayed, however, so it is about time that that bureaucratic nightmare ended and we allowed people to get on with such schemes, which are good for education and good for the regeneration of our towns.

Kevin Brennan: Yes, and may I acknowledge my hon. Friend's work in his constituency and in his role as a Select Committee Chairman? There is a process in place, and all parties agree that it is the right process to deal with what occurred following the Foster review. The Learning and Skills Council will very shortly take decisions on those projects that meet the priorities and criteria that the Foster review set out. I can promise my hon. Friend that he will not have to wait long for those decisions to be announced.

Mrs. Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Colleges throughout the country will have been dismayed to receive from the Learning and Skills Council yet further correspondence stating that the decisions that were supposed to be taken on capital programmes last week have been delayed. Indeed, the LSC's national projects director said:

> "We made an erroneous assumption that 30 to 40 projects might be shovel-ready, but there are an awful lot more."

Does that not indicate to the House that the LSC is still in turmoil? Perhaps the Minister will reassure the House today. Exactly when can our colleges expect to know whether they will get the money that they so badly need?

Kevin Brennan: The hon. Lady will know that the previous chief executive of the Learning and Skills Council resigned over the matter and that Ministers came to the House and gave an explanation and an apology for what had occurred at the LSC. The new chief executive wrote just last week to all college principals to explain that he was hopeful of announcing the projects that will go through to the next stage of the process very soon, and I have no reason to believe that that is not the case.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend and fellow MP4 band mate on a well-deserved promotion to his new post? We look forward to hearing the song that he will no doubt write about it.

On the colleges issue, my hon. Friend will be well aware of the worry that has been caused, the delay to the capital programme and the money that colleges have already expended in order to be shovel-ready. In my constituency, Goole college, which is part of the Hull college campus, is trying to push forward a project

as part of the town's renaissance project; and, in north Lincolnshire the excellent John Leggott college is shovel-ready and a local contractor, Clugston, is ready to go in and deliver. Will my hon. Friend look into the issue as a priority and give those people the news that they hope to hear?

Kevin Brennan: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming me to my post. Being shovel-ready—to use the phrase that appears in some papers relating to the issue—is one of the criteria, along with a scheme's impact on the local economy and local learning, and so on. Those criteria are now being used to come to an objective decision. On his concerns about the expenditure and costs that have been incurred so far, as I said in my answer to the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), reasonable costs will be reimbursed to colleges. I also assure my hon. Friend that the Learning and Skills Council's decisions will be announced shortly.

Mr. David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I, too, welcome the Minister to his new job or, should I say, jobs, because he has a couple. He has inherited a lamentable situation, but I wish him personally very well and success.

Further education colleges are strongly rooted in their local communities and characterised by their localness and accessibility. They successfully attract many learners from non-traditional backgrounds. What message does the Minister have for the thousands of learners and lecturers who now have to use sub-standard Portakabins and other accommodation as a result of the continuing delays that have been caused by the mismanagement of the capital programme and budget? When does he expect them to have proper classrooms again?

Kevin Brennan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. He and I worked closely together when we were both Whips, and I am sure that that will aid our working relationship in our new roles.

My message to those learners and to people across the country would be that I am positive that far fewer students are in Portakabins now than under the hon. Gentleman's party when it was in power. During its last year in power, it invested not a penny in further education colleges; there were 7 per cent. real-terms cuts in further education budgets during its last four years of power. From what we heard yesterday, I am afraid that it is clear that if it came back to power, there would be more of the same.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central) (Lab): Barnsley college has spent £12 million in preparing for its capital programme refurbishment. It is halfway through a four-phase redevelopment, two phases of which have already been completed. The third phase led to the demolition of the college. We are not only shovel-ready, to use the silly phrase, but the shovels have been on site since last year. Our programme has been interrupted, but there is absolutely no reason why the Learning and Skills Council cannot allow the project to continue. Barnsley college is £12 million in debt—technically, it is insolvent.

Kevin Brennan: I can reassure my hon. Friend by repeating the commitment that no college will be allowed to become insolvent as a result of the process. My hon. Friend raised the matter with the Prime Minister yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, and he was probably reasonably pleased with the answer. Barnsley college is one of the colleges being considered by the Learning and Skills Council under the objective criteria following the publication of the Foster report. I am pleased that there has been a high level of investment so far in the college, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will not have to wait long to hear from the LSC about whether Barnsley college has been successful in its next phase.

Adult Numeracy and Literacy

6. **Laura Moffatt** (Crawley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of adult numeracy and literacy courses. [279006]

The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs (Kevin Brennan): Since we launched our skills for life strategy in 2001, we have enabled 2.8 million people to achieve nationally recognised qualifications. Our strategy is changing lives and helping people to find, stay and progress in work, increase their earnings, help their children and play a more active role in their communities.

Laura Moffatt: I very much welcome that response, and I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. Does he agree that there are some real signs of improvement in our colleges due to the Government's early action? Job losses, however, remain part of the landscape. Will he encourage more people to take up the courses so that, if they happen to lose their jobs, they will be in a much better place from which to apply for new ones?

Kevin Brennan: I thank my hon. Friend for her welcome, although she slightly inflated my status. It is important that we commit to going further and try to be ambitious about our targets and ambitions for literacy and numeracy; that is why we recently refreshed our skills for life strategy in relation to those skills. It is also important to remember that the skills impact not only on the adult who acquires them, but on that adult's family. The ability to read a story to the children and help them with their sums and homework is really important. It is essential that we change the culture around such issues in our country—particularly in respect of numeracy, which has not been given the importance that it should have been in relation to literacy. We have a lot more to do, but good progress has been made so far.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): Should not numeracy and literacy be taught first in the home? We should encourage families to eat together, speak together and learn children the language and social skills that they need, rather than leaving that to public sector funding. We need to resolve the problem of broken families.

Kevin Brennan: We do, although we should teach the children rather than "learn" them, as the hon. Lady said. Seriously, though, she is right that such skills must start in the home. That is why it is so important that those basic skills should be taught to adults who have not acquired them. We are trying to address the issue from both ends, through, first, improving literacy and numeracy delivery in schools. That has been going on

for the past 12 years. Remember that children who started school in 1997 are now young adults coming through the system. We are also trying to make up for the decades of neglect of literacy and numeracy. We could blame Macmillan, Harold Wilson or anyone we like, but the legacy needs to be dealt with. That is what we are trying to do. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We must try to think family as we try to enable the skills to be taught from an early age.

Higher Education Facilities

7. **Sir Alan Beith** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Higher Education Funding Council for England on new locations for higher education facilities in England. [279007]

The Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination (Ms Rosie Winterton): On 6 May, my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) wrote to the HEFCE reaffirming the Government's commitment to the new university challenge.

Sir Alan Beith: Is the Minister aware that probably nowhere in England is further away from any institute of higher education than Berwick-upon-Tweed, and that a very good community-based bid involving Sunderland university and institutions on both sides of the border is going to be submitted? May I ask her and her fellow Ministers to take a close personal interest in filling this gap and bringing something to Berwick that would be hugely beneficial on both sides of the border?

Ms Winterton: As the right hon. Gentleman may know, some 27 areas have expressed an initial interest in applying for a new university centre. We have been delighted with the enthusiastic response from partnerships across the whole of England. I am sure that the application from his constituency will be considered alongside all the others, but we certainly take a special interest in it.

Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will know that in South Yorkshire our only higher education institutions are based in Sheffield. As long ago as the early 1990s, the three former coalfield boroughs of Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster were successful in winning city challenge funding from the previous Government. We tried to make our flagship project the establishment of a university of the coalfields in the Dearne valley. Would it not be fantastic if this Government could achieve the grand objective that the boroughs set, as long ago as the early 1990s, of establishing a university of the coalfields in the Dearne valley in South Yorkshire?

Ms Winterton: I know how passionately my hon. Friend feels about the quite low aspirations, in a sense, to go to university that there have been in our area among young people. I know, not only as a fellow South Yorkshire MP but as the regional Minister, that he has been campaigning extremely hard on that. He is absolutely right—we need to do everything we can to support young people in our area in going to university. That has been our aim, and it will continue to be so.

Intellectual Property

8. **Mr. John Whittingdale** (Maldon and East Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle illegal distribution of intellectual property. [279008]

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): The Government work to tackle IP crime in three main areas. First, we have to get the legal framework right, so I have been working with my ministerial colleagues on the "Digital Britain" agenda, particularly on the problem of file sharing. Secondly, we have to co-ordinate enforcement activities. That is why I have set up a new ministerial group to deal with issues of enforcement and to support the IP group. Of course, we also have to raise capacity and awareness.

Mr. Whittingdale: Does the Minister agree that online piracy represents a threat to the survival of the TV, film and music industries? What progress has he made in persuading internet service providers to take action against illegal file sharers by adopting a graduated response? Can he confirm that the Government will legislate to back up any action that is agreed?

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right; this important issue is challenging Governments across the world. Indeed, over the weekend elected politicians have been standing on that agenda in Sweden, and he will be aware of issues that have been raised in France. In this country, we have said that it is important to move to notification, which will reduce file-sharing activity so that people know that what they are doing is illegal, and we will move towards legislating to compel internet service providers and rights holders to work together.

Apprenticeship Courses

9. **Andrew Selous** (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): How much has been allocated to fund apprenticeship courses in (a) South-West Bedfordshire and (b) England in 2009-10. [279010]

The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs (Kevin Brennan): Funding allocations to apprenticeship training providers in England, including Bedfordshire, for the 2009-10 academic year have not yet been confirmed. The national apprenticeship service will notify providers later this month. We expect to spend about £1 billion on apprenticeships in 2008-09 and more than £1 billion in 2009-10.

Andrew Selous: Why are the Government cutting 30 student places at Dunstable college this year?

Kevin Brennan: Of course, we are not cutting any student places. In relation to apprenticeships in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, my understanding is that Bedford Training, for example, has exceeded its maximum contract value and reported a waiting list of 20 learners, but will have enough funding in 2009-10 to recruit all 20. However, if I am incorrect about the issue that he raises, I will meet him and ensure that we look into it.

Ms Dari Taylor (Stockton, South) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but I hope that he accepts that there is a funding problem. It has been primarily caused by many employers trying to cope with the recession and having in their terms to cut back, and apprenticeships are one

area in which they are doing so. A number of young apprentices in my constituency have finished only 50 per cent. of their courses. I ask my hon. Friend to look at that problem to see how he can help those young people to complete their apprenticeships.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, although I should point out to her that adult starts on apprenticeships have risen from 300 in 2006-07 to 27,000 in 2007-08, so the context is increased investment rather than any reduction. We have to make that clear. However, she is absolutely right to point out that redundancy can have an impact on apprentices, as it can on anyone else during an economic downturn. The national apprenticeship service provides a one-stop shop for employers, providers and learners to access information support should that occur, and the intention is to place apprentices on suitable schemes. Also, the length of time for which they may undertake training if they cannot immediately be placed has been extended. However, it is important to set the context of the increased investment and number of apprentice places.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I welcome the Minister and the rest of the team to their posts. Members of all parties are really pleased to see the rise in the number of adult apprenticeships, and the funding for 2010 looks reasonably secure. The problem that the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) raised was about employers taking part.

On 9 June, in a comment to *The Guardian*, the Chancellor made it clear that education would be one of the priorities after 2010, together with housing, transport and health. Will the Minister give the House a categorical guarantee that in that period the funding for adult skills—particularly adult FE and higher education, which will be crucial to the future of our economy—will be maintained and not cut?

Kevin Brennan: The commitment of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to apprenticeships is well known and long-standing, and I confirm that it will remain an absolute priority of this Government to grow the number of apprentices and invest in them. I have been appointed Minister with responsibility for apprentices and will work in the Department for Children, Schools and Families as well as the new Business Department, which shows our commitment to connecting the under-19 and adult apprenticeship schemes. I also commit to engaging an apprentice in my own private office.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I, too, congratulate Ministers on their new posts, although we believe that our colleges and universities are not simply the instruments of a Business Department, and they certainly do not look forward to reporting to Alan Sugar.

I congratulate the Department on its efforts to improve social mobility with an imaginative new route into the House of Lords—four Ministers so far, and at least another one on the way. Does the Minister recognise that in order really to improve social mobility we have to spread apprenticeships and provide new routes from them to university? Does he accept that at the moment, the biggest single victims of the recession are young people? They see apprenticeships disappearing even after they have been started, and they face the prospect of finding it hard to get to university when they apply, and of being unemployed when they leave university. Will the Minister, new to these responsibilities, make a simple commitment that no young person who has started an apprenticeship will find themselves losing it before they have been able to complete it?

Kevin Brennan: As I said earlier, some redundancies in firms are inevitable during an economic downturn and a recession, and that could include apprenticeships. I have committed to ensuring that the national apprenticeship service will do all it can to place those apprentices in similar apprenticeships elsewhere, and that extended training is available if that is not possible in the immediate future.

The hon. Gentleman is right about social mobility and the need to focus on younger people and apprenticeships and increase the numbers. As someone from a working-class background, with a steelworker for a father and a dinner lady for a mother, I know something about social mobility and the importance of training, education and apprenticeships. I knew as a young man growing up in south Wales that many of my friends benefited from the apprenticeships that were decimated when the hon. Gentleman's party was in power. That is why we are making such investment. We will publish a framework in the summer for apprentices getting through to university.

Topical Questions

T2. [279025] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr. Pat McFadden): Our Department brings together support for business and enterprise with innovation, skills and further and higher education policy to ensure that we foster competitiveness and spread opportunity. All that is important to Britain's economic future.

Philip Davies: Are the Government still committed to implementing the entire package of reforms proposed by Richard Hooper on regulation, pensions and ownership? Lord Mandelson recently said that that was vital to the Royal Mail. Is it still vital or has it been ditched to save the Prime Minister's skin?

Mr. McFadden: The reform of Royal Mail is important, and Richard Hooper recommended the three elements that the hon. Gentleman outlined. The Bill to carry forward those reforms has completed its stages in the other place and been introduced here. Its Second Reading is a decision for the business managers at the appropriate time. On whether all three elements are essential, they are very important, but, as the Secretary of State also said, we will continue to try to secure best value for the taxpayer, and the timetable for any transaction for Royal Mail may be a little longer than that for the legislation.

T3. [279026] **Lindsay Roy** (Glenrothes) (Lab): This Government have given a clear commitment to continuing to support business and enterprise during the recession. What additional dividends does my right hon. Friend anticipate from the appointment of Sir Alan Sugar to the departmental team?

Mr. McFadden: Sir Alan Sugar is one of Britain's most well known and respected entrepreneurs. He will act as an adviser to Government—not as a Minister. We believe that it is important to draw on that sort of entrepreneurial talent precisely because of the economic challenges that the country faces. While we draw on the best talent available, others are indulging in parlour games about peers and personalities. We will continue to draw on whatever talent is necessary to do the best economic job for the country.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): May I congratulate the Minister on his elevation to Cabinet status in Lord Mandelson's amazing, ever-expanding empire, which now stretches from space to defence sales to universities and further education? No doubt Lord Mandelson has other territorial ambitions in mind.

On 11 May in the House of Lords, Lord Mandelson said:

"It would be irresponsible of the Government to allow delays to the suite of measures needed to reform Royal Mail and secure the future of the universal postal service... Any delay would merely serve to threaten the sustainability of the network."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 May 2009; Vol. 710, c. 848.]

The Minister knows that we expected Second Reading of the Bill two days ago, on Tuesday. He knows that it is the acid test of whether this lame-duck Government are any longer capable of delivering a difficult decision about any important subject. Why is the Bill being delayed if it is not because of the internal political dissension in the extraordinary Cabinet in which he now finds himself serving?

Mr. McFadden: The right hon. and learned Gentleman must know that no date for a Second Reading was announced. The Government are committed—*[Interruption.]* The Government are committed to reform of the Royal Mail. The challenges that it faces in addressing the pension fund deficit, the need for investment and change, and the need to change the regulatory system are real. We remain committed to the legislation, which will be brought forward. What the Secretary of State also said about the transaction is that we have a duty to secure the best value of money for the taxpayer and to have an eye to the market conditions, but the legislation will be brought forward.

T6. [279029] **Ann Coffey** (Stockport) (Lab): I am very pleased that this year 55 per cent. more young people in Stockport are going to university than in 1997. The new university centre, in which Stockport college of further education has expressed an interest, will encourage even more young people to do higher degrees. However, Stockport college is still in negotiations with the Learning and Skills Council about its capital programme. When a final decision is made, may I urge the Minister to ensure that consideration is given to the college's excellent record of achievement and that funding is released so that the college can complete its new town centre campus?

The Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs (Kevin Brennan): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaigning and lobbying that she has done on behalf of her constituents. I know that she wrote to the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills earlier this month to reiterate her support for that programme. As I said earlier in questions, the Learning and Skills Council will be announcing decisions in the near future. One criterion in the new objective set of criteria that followed the report commissioned earlier this year is the ability of any investment to impact on learning.

T4. [279027] **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West) (Con): How many legislative reform orders have Ministers in the Department laid before Parliament this year?

Mr. McFadden: I brought a legislative reform order on insolvency before the House just some weeks ago, and I recommend the debate to the hon. Gentleman very strongly.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend comment on the provision of learning for pleasure and its importance to communities, and to older people in particular? I thank her for recently leading a lively debate with some lively elderly people in my constituency, on Bar lane in Riddlesden. Learning for pleasure can mean all sorts of things, and can create cross-departmental savings and advantages. With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to hark back to 1983, when I took a course at my local college—I was unemployed at the time—in teaching English as a second language. As a result, for four years I dedicated my Wednesday mornings to teaching young Pakistani women who had entered this country as wives. They were not allowed to go to the local college, but I was able to introduce them to English, which was a useful exercise for them and me.

The Minister for Regional Economic Development and Co-ordination (Ms Rosie Winterton): I have very fond memories of the meeting that I had with those lively older people in my hon. Friend's constituency. They were extremely keen to put their views on how important learning is for older people. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have studied the White Paper "The Learning Revolution", which sets out an ambitious vision for community learning in the 21st century, with £30 million of spending added to it. She is quite right that there is often a social impact too. The experience that she described is one that I know is shared by many others. The White Paper will do a lot to encourage that kind of activity.

T5. [279028] **Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister responsible for further education will be aware that the College of West Anglia in my constituency is one of those colleges whose capital programme has been put on hold. It was to have a new campus which would have been the centrepiece and foundation stone of a major regeneration project in South Lynn. The delay will not only impact on the wider community but cause widespread anxiety among the staff, lecturers and students at the college. Will the Minister confirm that the changes and reorganisations in his Department will not impact in any way on the LSC's decision?

Kevin Brennan: I can absolutely confirm that the changes in the Department will not impact on that, because we have already set in place the necessary measures to resolve the issue of the pipeline projects—the capital projects for FE colleges—through the Foster

review, which has set out the objective criteria that are to be followed. They include considerations of the impact on regeneration and on learning, and of whether a project is ready to go ahead. I should like to add that, in this year's Budget, the Chancellor pledged an additional £300 million for that capital project in recognition of its importance during the economic downturn. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that he will not have to wait much longer to hear the results of the LSC's deliberations.

T8. [279031] **Mr. Mike Hall** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): May I press my hon. Friend on the case for the Mid-Cheshire college redevelopment? It is an absolutely fantastic £35 million redevelopment project for a college that provides an outstanding quality of education. However, the project is not quite shovel-ready, and the fact that delays to the shovel-ready projects have already been announced means that colleges further down the line will face even more delays. The college is desperate to know the time lines for the decision on its allocation so that it can plan for the future. It is also worried that the LSC's recent announcements on the criteria used to determine funding do not mention quality. Surely the funding should follow quality, and outstanding colleges such as Mid-Cheshire college should benefit from that funding.

Kevin Brennan: Funding will follow—or will lead—improved learning opportunities. That is part of the project. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done to promote that project in his constituency. The projects that are not quite ready to be dealt with at this stage will be dealt with later in the year if they are at the appropriate stage by then. In addition to the £300 million from the Budget, which I mentioned earlier, an additional £2.3 billion will be spent on these projects during this comprehensive spending review period. Furthermore, there has already been an indicative letter from the Treasury to the Learning and Skills Council about a further pledge of £300 million a year, so this is not something that will come to an end—provided, that is, that we have a Government who are committed to making that investment.

T10. [279033] **Paul Rowen** (Rochdale) (LD): The education maintenance allowance has been a huge success. However, one of its problems is that there is a sharp cut-off related to parental income. One of my constituents, a single parent, has a son at university and another in sixth-form college. Does the Minister accept that the sharp income-related cut-off takes no account of additional circumstances and can discourage many people from staying on in education? Will he look into that?

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): I do not think that I can agree with the hon. Gentleman that the scheme discourages young people from staying on. Quite the contrary: when I have visited colleges, I have spoken to young people who are very grateful for the EMA. It has been a success. However, I am willing to look into the particular circumstances that he mentions, although that has not been what I have heard as I have gone round the colleges and universities.

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Notwithstanding the answer that the Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills gave earlier, does not he recognise that the Postal Services Bill seems to have disappeared into the legislative ether, somewhere between the other place and Committee Room 14? Does not he accept that one part of that Bill is of particular importance for the future, whatever happens? That is the regulatory toolkit that is needed and that has been agreed on by those on both sides of the House. If he is not going to bring the Bill forward, will he at least agree to bring that measure forward?

Mr. McFadden: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that regulatory change in postal services is necessary, and the proposal in the Bill is to put at the heart of the new regulatory system the maintenance of the universal service—the six days a week, one-price-goes-anywhere service that is at the heart of our postal system. I remind the House that the conclusion drawn by Richard Hooper was that if we did not change and reform the Royal Mail, that service would be under threat. That is what has happened in some other countries, and it is certainly not what we want to see here in the United Kingdom.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): May I refer once again to the LSC's review of further education college building, particularly in respect of the Manchester college? In terms of excellence, capacity to learn and shovel-readiness, that college's proposals are high on the priority list. Manchester college differs from other further education colleges in that further education is the most likely route in Manchester for the overwhelming majority of young people in post-school education, as they do not go in sufficient numbers into higher education. It thus matters far more that our FE system, which is already excellent, is improved. I hope that my hon. Friend will take that point on board.

Kevin Brennan: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a powerful point on behalf of his constituents and shows his intimate knowledge of the education system in his constituency. I can only repeat that the LSC is considering all the projects in the pipeline and will make its announcement shortly, based on the objective criteria that we have talked about. We should remember that this is not about whether we should make investment in further education, but about how we make it, which is in stark contrast to what would happen if the Conservative party were in power.

Business of the House

11.31 am

Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming parliamentary business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 15 JUNE—Opposition day (13th Allotted Day). There will be a debate on the impact of business rates followed by a debate on the impact of the recession on rural communities. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

TUESDAY 16 JUNE—A general debate on European affairs.

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE—Mr. Speaker's valedictory and tributes by the House followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Business Rate Supplements Bill.

THURSDAY 18 JUNE—Topical debate: subject to be announced, followed by a general debate on food, farming and the environment.

FRIDAY 19 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 22 June will include:

MONDAY 22 JUNE—The House will meet to elect a Speaker.

TUESDAY 23 JUNE—Second Reading of the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE—Opposition day [14th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 25 JUNE—House Business.

FRIDAY 26 JUNE—Private Members' Bills.

Alan Duncan: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. I also welcome the hon. Member for Worsley (Barbara Keeley) as her new Deputy Leader of the House, and express the appreciation of Opposition Members for the manner in which her predecessor, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is now an Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, conducted himself in that position. His grasp of detail and his approach to the House was respected and appreciated—and his mastery of Spanish, I understand, makes him well suited to his new job as Minister for Latin America. [HON. MEMBERS: "And French."] And French, we are told. On his moving, we thus say a friendly adios—and au revoir, too.

I want to take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to House staff for keeping this place going during the tube strike.

May we have a statement—or even a debate—on the legitimacy, remit, structure and organisation of the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills? As we have just heard in parliamentary questions, the recent reshuffle that the Prime Minister was forced into staging has to be seen as one of the most shambolic in political history, with 11 Ministers resigning from the Government in the course of seven days. Worse still, civil servants in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills returned to their desks after lunch to find that their Department had been abolished, and subsumed into the empire of "he who must now be named the First Secretary". This new super-Department has 11 Ministers, over half of whom are non-elected peers—no doubt exactly what the Government have in mind as they discuss their latest schemes for democratic renewal. Now that Lord Mandelson is Secretary of State for almost everything—including outer space—and has become the de facto Deputy Prime Minister, is the Leader of the House still in favour of her earlier proposal that he should be able to answer questions in the House of Commons?

May we have a debate on higher education and the prospects of graduates? We must not forget that universities too have been casually added to Lord Mandelson's portfolio. However, this is the week in which we learnt that in 2007-08 one in seven students dropped out of university, a quarter failed to finish their degrees, and almost half the students at London Metropolitan university quit their courses before the end of the year. Worse still, a report published today suggests that 40,000 students graduating this year, no doubt with heavy debts, will still be struggling to find work in six months' time. With the scale of the mess that the Government's have made in higher education becoming more apparent by the day, does the right hon. and learned Lady really think that this is the time to be creating further upheaval in Departments just to satisfy ministerial empire-building?

The reshuffle has also left some important pieces of legislation in complete confusion. May we have a statement on the Government's immigration policy? Comments made by the departing Home Secretary on the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill during her appearance in the Chamber last week left Members on both sides of the House perplexed about the Government's basic policy on immigration, and about whether they are in favour of a future cap. Given that the British National party managed to win in areas that the Labour party had deserted, where much concern was expressed about the impact of immigration on jobs, does the Leader of the House not think that there should now be a clear statement of what the Government's policy on immigration really is?

Let me repeat a question that I asked last week, and which Opposition spokesmen pursued during Question Time today: when will we debate the Second Reading of the Postal Services Bill? May I also ask when we shall see the draft legislative programme that we would normally have seen by this time of year?

Last week the right hon. Lady asserted that a Treasury Minister had recently updated the House on the progress of the independent inquiry into Equitable Life compensation during a debate in Westminster Hall. However, the only real information that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury gave there was bad news—the fact that no actuary had yet been appointed to Sir John Chadwick's review body. The Government have been deliberately vacillating for months, and I have to say that I think the House's temper is beginning to fray. Will the right hon. Lady now give an absolute guarantee that Sir John will produce an interim report—for us, in the House, before the summer recess—on how Equitable Life policyholders will be compensated?

Is the Leader of the House concerned about the fact that since she has become Minister for Women and Equality, the number of women in the Cabinet has

actually decreased? Although we know that she could never be dismissed as mere window-dressing—indeed, if she were, I would immediately become the window cleaner—may I take this opportunity to reiterate my support for any bid that she might yet make to become Britain's second woman Prime Minister? I echo the comment made on *The Guardian* website this week:

"I'd like to see Harriet Harman as Labour's candidate for PM at the next election. She'd be just like Margaret Thatcher—a female party leader who convinces millions to vote Tory."

Ms Harman: I echo the hon. Gentleman's appreciative comments about my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the former Deputy Leader of the House, who now has responsibility for European issues. I agree that he was a brilliant Deputy Leader—and he does not only speak Spanish; I believe that he also speaks French, German and Italian.

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): And Welsh?

Ms Harman: And probably Welsh as well.

Let me also express, on behalf of all of us, our appreciation of the House's staff in connection with the tube strike, and say on behalf of everyone in London that we expect agreement to be reached. Londoners cannot be held to ransom and have their lives made a misery as a result of a dispute involving the tube, which is the backbone of London's transport structures.

The hon. Gentleman commented on the new structure of the Department responsible for business; there have, of course, been departmental questions to that Department this morning. We make no apology for putting supporting business and tackling the economic crisis at the centre of Government action. That is a priority for this country and the biggest challenge for Government. We make no apology for reconfiguring the machinery of government to be focused effectively on that task.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the prospects for graduates. It is right that we see further and higher education not only as essential for individuals who want the opportunity to achieve their full potential, but as a central economic issue. The recovery has to be skills based, and include as many people as possible, which is why configuring the universities into the Department responsible for business at the centre of our economic strategy is very important. Since we came into government there has been a massive increase in the number of people able to undertake further and higher education. The most recent figures show that since 1997 there has been about a 300 per cent. increase in the number of my constituents who now are able to gain degrees; I am sure that the picture will be the same in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. That is massive progress, on which we will continue to build.

Our immigration policy remains as it ever was: firm, fair and points-based. We have all been shocked and horrified by the fact that two great regions of this country—the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside—are represented by the British National party, which has in its constitution a provision that no one who is not white can be a member. Under the Equality Bill that is passing through the House, that constitution will be made unlawful. I know that the Opposition voted against the Equality Bill, but I hope that they will now strongly support the Bill, which will prevent us from having an apartheid political party in this country.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge) was being interviewed by George Alagiah on Channel 4, she said, "I was born in Egypt but I could be a member of the British National party because I am white. You were born in Britain but you would not be able to be a member of the British National party because of the colour of your skin." All of us should agree that there is no place in this country for a political party to have an apartheid constitution, and the Equality Bill will prevent that.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alan Duncan) asked about the Postal Services Bill, which he noticed was not in the forthcoming business that I have announced. He knows that I announce two weeks at a time. The Bill has completed its stages through the House of Lords, and he must await the announcement of its arrival in this House.

The draft legislative programme has been delayed because this year we had elections in June, immediately prior to which there was a purdah period; previously the elections were in May. That affected the timetabling of the draft legislative programme, which will appear very soon.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Equitable Life. It is the policyholders who have lost out in Equitable Life who are frustrated and want action quickly. The House will be updated, before it rises, on the progress on Sir John Chadwick's investigations.

As far as women in politics are concerned, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued attention to this issue. It is important that women in politics make sure that we deliver for women in this country. Politics is not about us as politicians; it is about what we as women and men working together can do in respect of the lives of women and men in this country. That is why I hope that Members on both sides will be prepared to support extra maternity pay and leave, more flexible working for balancing work and family responsibilities, ending pay discrimination against women and having more women in the House of Commons.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs issued a written statement about the situation facing Dairy Farmers of Britain, in which he guaranteed that all parties would work together to try to minimise the impact of the closures taking place and the demise of dairy farms. The regional development agency, the banks and the local work force are working together to try to avoid the closure of a dairy in my Blaydon constituency, which could happen tonight. The one group that it is not doing its bit is the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Please can we have what the Secretary of State offered: an updated statement to the House as the situation develops? Please will the Leader of the House pass that message on to DEFRA from me?

Ms Harman: I know that this issue demands urgent attention, and the points that my hon. Friend makes are very forceful. This needs to be looked at right away, but there will, of course, be an opportunity to discuss these matters when there is a general debate on food and farming next Thursday.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): The hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) raises a very important issue for all the farmers who are members of that co-operative, and I hope that it will be debated.

First, may I join in the tributes to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)? He entertained us in the debate on the idea of a Dissolution yesterday evening, despite having been reshuffled to the Foreign Office. My only regret is that the Leader of the House was not able to join us for that debate as well. One would have thought that the Dissolution of the House was a business of the House matter—but it seems that as far as the Cabinet was concerned, it was a matter for Wales, and Wales only. In any case, the Leader of the House has survived in the Cabinet—she is one of the few Members who have done so—and we are glad about that.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alan Duncan) raised the issue of the machinery of government. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills was created only two years ago in a great splash of publicity. I have with me a letter from the then Secretary of State, who has since been reshuffled, in which he says that the new Department gives him the opportunity

"to make a real difference to people's lives"

a difference that he describes as "enormous and very exciting." He goes on to say that the Department

"will provide a strong, integrated and permanent voice across Government for effective investment in research, science and skills at all levels".

This "exciting" and "permanent" addition lasted for only two years, however, and then disappeared in order to gratify Lord Mandelson. It cannot be right for government to be conducted in this way, without recourse to Parliament, without any parliamentary opportunity to debate the practicalities and cost-benefit analysis of such changes. I invite the Leader of the House to give the House the opportunity to discuss how government is arranged, because such changes cannot be made on a whim. There are costs involved and practical consequences, and we should have the opportunity to debate them.

I note that the only opportunity to discuss the economy next week will be provided by the Opposition. The Government, having given us an assurance every week that there will be such an opportunity, have failed to provide one. However, we need a debate very soon on the prospects for public sector spending. We know now that the Conservatives are committed to 10 per cent. cuts, but we suspect that the Government, too, are committed to cuts in public spending. Would it not be better to have an honest, open and grown-up debate about the prospects for public spending, so that we can actually see what the consequences will be for our public services?

May we also have a debate on the probation service? Cuts in this area will have a very dangerous effect on our country, and we now know that £120 million is to be cut from the probation service budget by 2012. Probation work is a difficult enough job without the reduction in manpower that will result from that cut. We all know that the probation service is essential to protecting the public, so may we have a debate about what is envisaged?

I was tempted to ask the former Deputy Leader about my final point in the course of last night's debate, but he is at the Foreign Office now, and therefore does not know the answer, so I will ask the Leader of the House. The Prime Minister has come up with a raft of parliamentary and constitutional reforms from the "committee on public safety", or whatever it is called, which he urges us all now to embrace. Can the Leader of the House give me a clear timetable for implementing those proposals? Unless we implement them as a matter of urgency, the public will not believe these are genuine urgent reforms; they will believe they are simply yet more spin to get the Prime Minister out of a difficult situation.

Ms Harman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, too, for his comments about the former Deputy Leader of the House, and I would like to take the opportunity to welcome warmly my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley (Barbara Keeley), who is going to be an excellent successor to the previous excellent Deputy Leader of the House. On the machinery of government changes, we should all recognise that what will help the economy for the future is having a strong economy based on science, technology, research, manufacturing and higher education. So bringing those all together in a very powerful Department at the heart of central Government, which will work with all the regional development agencies, and with Scotland and Wales, is important. That is what lies behind this new machinery of government.

As for the economic debate, the hon. Gentleman drew attention to the fact that there will be two Opposition day debates on Monday, and they will touch on the economy. There will be a debate on European affairs on Tuesday, which is bound to have the economy as a central issue because the global economic crisis obviously has to be tackled at the European and international level, as well as the national level. One in 10 of the jobs in this country depend on Europe, and he can certainly be confident that for Labour Members the economic dimension will be very much to the fore in the debate that we have scheduled for Tuesday 16 June. In addition, on Wednesday 17 June there will be a debate on the Business Rate Supplements Bill, so what with the Opposition day, and debates on European affairs and on the Business Rate Supplements Bill, enough debate on the economy has been scheduled for next week. If the hon. Gentleman wants, he can suggest a further such debate by way of a topical debate—but I did not think that that was necessary.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned public spending, and he was right to say that the Conservatives have revealed that they would cut it. They have already shown that public spending will have to be cut to pay for their changes to inheritance tax, which help the wealthiest, and for their wish to pay back debt quickly at the expense of cutting public services. They have already said that they want to cut public investment this year and next—right in the middle of a recession. The Government are determined to ensure that we have public investment not only to help us through the recession, but to sustain important public services for the future. Of course we will have to pay back debt, but our choice on tax is to increase the rate for the top rate taxpayers to 50 per cent., rather than to give huge inheritance tax cuts for a few thousand millionaires.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the probation service, and he will doubtless be able to seek to put his questions directly to Justice Ministers at Justice questions next week. There has been a 70 per cent. real-terms increase in probation funding over the past 10 years—

Hon. Members: It has all gone on computers.

Mr. Heath: Computers that don't work.

Ms Harman: It has not all gone on computers that don't work; there has been an increase of more than one third in the staff, and reoffending rates have dropped.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): May we have an early debate on the engineering and steel industry? My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (John Healey), my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith) and I have asked for an urgent meeting with the First Secretary of State, because although there are some welcome signs of recovery, the lag-time for steel is considerable and orders on the books are down by half. We could be facing a serious situation—there is potential for closures—in the engineering and steel industry. That would mean that as a recovery takes hold we would be importing the steel, which until now has been made in Britain. We need some temporary bridging help, and that should be discussed fully in this House. If it is not, can the Leader of the House urge the First Secretary of State to find time, among all his other responsibilities, to meet my colleagues and me to discuss this vital issue?

Ms Harman: I certainly will urge the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills to meet my right hon. Friend and other Members of Parliament who are concerned about the issues that he has raised. Perhaps we should have a topical debate on the point he makes about the steel industry, and the effect of this situation not only on the constituency and the region that he represents, but on Teesside and the north-east. We have to ensure that we secure our manufacturing base in these difficult times. That is an issue for many Welsh Members of Parliament too, so I will take what he says not only as a request for a meeting with the Secretary of State, but as a suggestion for a topical debate next Thursday.

Mr. Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): May we have a debate on food labelling? Has the Leader of the House seen the latest report from the Consumers Association, which reveals that a number of sandwiches that are on sale to the public labelled as "healthy" actually contain more salt than nine packets of crisps, and are awash with saturated fat? Should not our law require that salty, fatty rubbish be labelled as such?

Ms Harman: The right hon. Gentleman may find the opportunity to raise this issue in the general debate on Thursday 18 June.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend understands the shock, anger, grief and disbelief of parents, and indeed the whole community of Plymouth, on learning of the arrest earlier this week of a nursery worker and the charges today. The police and social services are clearly offering support, but will she advise me and keep me informed of any appropriate opportunities to raise the issues that will inevitably flow from the concerns of the parents and the community?

Ms Harman *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) may not realise it, but this matter is now sub judice because there has been a charge. It is best that we move on.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on family courts, because she will be aware of growing concern about their operation? The judiciary and social services appear to decide the future of children—in some cases, the children have been kidnapped from their natural parents—and there is no opportunity for the parents or the media to cover these particular events. Is it not time that there was justice and fairness for natural parents? Children should not be dealt with in court, behind closed doors and in secret, where only the social services and judiciary have any say and they cannot be held to account.

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the family courts are incredibly important. They do decide children's future and make life-changing decisions in respect of parents, especially when they order children to go for adoption or be placed in care. It is because of the importance of their work and of all those who work in them that we have introduced a measure of openness into the family courts. Although we must ensure the anonymity and privacy of children whose detailed family circumstances are being discussed in the courts, it is also important that there should be public confidence that people can see the evidence on which the courts are making those decisions. In the past week or so we have introduced openness in the family courts, so that people can see that the courts are doing their work fairly and that justice is not only done, but is seen to be done.

If I could say to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy)—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have made a ruling on this matter. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) is making an argument at the side of the Chair, but let us not take that matter any further. It is not helpful when hon. Members come to the Chair to put the case to me that the Leader of House had something to reply on the matter. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am not privy to what the Leader of the House might say, and I must decide what is taken on the Floor of the House and try to make sure that things are properly done.

Ms Harman *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. and learned Lady is not going to mention anything about the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton, so I take it that that is the end of that matter. I call Mr. Hancock.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South) (LD): May I draw to the attention of the Leader of the House early-day motion 581, in my name and that of 242 other hon. Members on the question of a proper requirement for food labelling, especially regarding chicken?

[That this House believes that all chicken meat, including imported chicken meat, should be labelled as to farming method and preferably stocking density; further believes the labelling regulation that requires packs of shell eggs to be labelled as to production method should be extended to chicken meat; congratulates Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Compassion in World Farming on their Chicken Out! campaign calling on supermarkets to introduce labelling as to farming method to allow consumers to make informed choices; notes that most UK chickens are still reared

[Mr. Mike Hancock]

intensively in overcrowded conditions and have been bred to grow so quickly that many suffer from lameness and heart problems; and calls on the Government to make it a requirement for all chicken producers to meet the conditions of the RSPCA's Freedom Food scheme.]

When her ministerial colleagues come to the House next Thursday for the debate on food, farming and the environment, will she ask them to introduce proposals to make it a requirement on chicken producers to follow the freedom food scheme promoted by the RSPCA to provide proper transparency and an understanding of what people are actually eating when they eat chicken products?

Ms Harman: As I said to the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Knight), there is a debate on food, farming and environment next Thursday. The questions of food labelling, nutritional standards, school meals and healthy diets should perhaps be the subject of a topical debate.

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): May I urge on my right hon. and learned Friend the argument for a debate on public spending because it is in the interest of the whole country to know where cuts would fall. People in the public sector want to know whether those 10 per cent. of cuts would impact on their jobs, and on education and many other areas. Even people working in private firms dependent on Government contracts need to know how they would be affected. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) mentioned the steel industry, and that too would be hit by a 10 per cent. cut in public spending. It is important that we tease out where the Opposition parties—not just the Conservative party—stand on public spending, because it will affect people's lives.

Ms Harman: I will take that as a suggestion for a topical debate. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) said that we needed a further debate next week on the economy, and we do have the opportunity of a topical debate. Perhaps we could have a topical debate on the impact on the economy and on public services of future investment in public spending.

We are clear that every penny of public money invested must be properly spent; that we have to bring the public finances back into balance over the medium and longer term; and that the taxes that should go up should be those on the highest earners. We are determined to protect capital investment in policing, education, health and transport. A 10 per cent. cut in public investment would cause serious concern for those services and all those who work in them. I will look to make that the subject of a topical debate next Thursday, so that the Opposition will have plenty of time to explain to those who depend on the public services how they will withstand 10 per cent. cuts.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire) (Con): In the Prime Minister's statement yesterday on constitutional renewal, he said that the Government

"will work with a special parliamentary commission comprising Members from all sides of this House, convened for a defined period to advise on necessary reforms".—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2009; Vol. 493, c. 797.]

I welcome that statement. Can the Leader of the House now fill in the details? Who will sit on this new commission, what form will it take and when will it be set up? Is not the need for this commission the final nail in the coffin of the Modernisation Committee?

Ms Harman: I realise now that I failed to respond to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) on the time frame for the announcements that were made by the Prime Minister yesterday. There will be the opportunity for me to bring before the House a resolution that will establish the Committee of the House, made up of—I hope—senior Members who have put a lot of time and effort into these issues, as the right hon. Gentleman has done, so that we can look at many of the proposals that have come, not just from the Modernisation Committee, but from the Procedure Committee and ad hoc groups such as Parliament First. Then we can see whether we can complete this work within a limited time frame, preferably before the House rises for summer. After all, most of these proposals have been knocking around for some time.

Members of the House need to get together and say what we need to do now to ensure that the House can work more effectively, especially in relation to the choosing and timetabling of non-Government business, especially on e-petitions and on strengthening the integrity and work of Select Committees. We should not hang around: we should make some decisions. It is right that that is not led by the Government, but by a Committee of the House. To facilitate that, I will bring a resolution to the House to set that Committee up.

I cannot tell the House at this stage how many members the Committee will have or who they will be, because we will have to have discussions on that. However, if hon. Members would like to put themselves forward to be considered for the Committee, they can let me know.

As for the timeliness of the measures to restore public confidence, the House will know that shortly we will have complete transparency on all the claims made by hon. Members and the allowances paid over the last four years. The House authorities will put those on the website very shortly. That transparency will be reassuring to the public.

The House will also know, from the Prime Minister's statement yesterday, that there will be legislation on a new parliamentary standards authority. The Justice Secretary and I held talks with the leaders of all the other parties yesterday. I hope that we can have the necessary legislation before the House—and conclude all stages—before the House rises for the summer. The public want complete transparency. They also want to see that we are no longer deciding the rules for our allowances and administering them. They want that to be done independently, and that is something on which all the party leaders agree. It is not technical and complicated, so we should just get on and do it.

The third element of restoring public confidence concerns those occasions on which Members were paid allowances to which they were not entitled and that did not comply with the rules as they were at the time, which might have been the result of a mistake, not wrongdoing. Whatever the reason, those overpayments need to be paid back. The reassessment process will apply to all Members, not just those of a particular

party. All claims for the past four years will be considered. The public can then be sure of complete transparency. All the claims will be on the website and there will be a new independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to administer all claims, and money that needs to be paid back will be paid back. We can also improve the way in which this House does business, and in that way we will ensure that the public have the confidence that they are entitled to have in this House of Commons.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Would my right hon. and learned Friend agree that some of the constitutional issues trailed yesterday by the Prime Minister are so fundamentally important that they should be fully debated in this Chamber? As Chairman of the Children, Schools and Families Committee, I single out the proposed change to voting age. It is fashionable to think that reducing the voting age to 16 is a brave, new approach, but the implications of becoming an adult at 16, and losing all the protections of "Every Child Matters" and the five outcomes, are very serious. We must not imperil children and truncate childhood without serious deliberation.

Ms Harman: The argument about the age at which people are entitled to vote is worth having. No one could get the impression from the statement that the Prime Minister made yesterday that a snap decision would be made on that. I have indicated those aspects of the statement on which we want prompt and expedited action, but the Prime Minister also mentioned areas in which further debate is necessary. I know that people have strongly held views on different sides of the argument about voting at 16. I think that there is a strong case for very good citizenship education in schools, and as soon as that is finished, people could come out of the classroom into the polling station. There is an argument for votes at 16. I appreciate that some people do not think so, but no one can seriously argue that giving young people the right to vote at 16 is equivalent to child abuse. We need a sensible debate.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): Further to the question by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) and in the light of the Prime Minister's statement yesterday on constitutional renewal, may we please have a debate next week in Government time on the Floor of the House on pre-legislative scrutiny? Given that there is widespread agreement across the parties about the benefits of such scrutiny, but that in the Session 2007-08 only nine of 31 Government Bills were published in draft, would not such a debate allow the Government the opportunity to state whether they agree that in future, pre-legislative scrutiny in the name of better Bills should become the norm rather than the exception?

Ms Harman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's sentiments. We need more scrutiny in advance. The publication of the draft legislative programme is an attempt to ensure that the public can be more involved in the likely legislative process. We need more Bills to be published in draft, but if the time scale is urgent we also need to retain some flexibility for the Government. The ability to publish clauses in draft also exists.

I agree with the sentiment that the hon. Gentleman has expressed, although I am not quite sure where his suggestion would come in the process, but I will reflect on that point.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I am grateful to the Leader of the House for organising a general debate on European affairs. Will she arrange for the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), who has been working very hard in the European Councils to try to get an amendment on the extension of copyright for recording artists, to be at that debate? Is she aware that a meeting of COREPER takes place today and that the Czech presidency is abusing its position as president to keep the British proposal to extend copyright to 70 years off the agenda? The Czech presidency is trying to keep it off the agenda for the Council meeting at which the matter should be decided before its presidency ends.

The work of the British Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills must be commended for getting the issue on to the agenda and on getting it the support of Parliament. Surely we cannot allow subterfuge by the Czech presidency to prevent this matter, which has a majority in Council, from going to Council.

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend has made a number of important points that I will draw to the attention of the Ministers who will be participating in the European affairs debate next Tuesday.

Julia Goldsworthy (Falmouth and Camborne) (LD): May we have a debate on the effectiveness and accountability of regional development agencies? The Government say that RDAs are key to promoting economic recovery, but this week, the South West of England Regional Development Agency announced tens of millions of pounds-worth of cuts in funding, which means that projects such as dredging the docks in Falmouth, which will safeguard existing jobs and create new jobs, will now not go ahead. Does that not make a mockery of the scrutiny process, as the Regional Select Committee will, at best, get to take a look at the decision after it has already happened?

Ms Harman: The Regional Select Committees, in particular—and the Regional Grand Committees, when they start their work—will be able to hold the chief executives of RDAs to account for their plans. They will be able to require them to set out their plans and will scrutinise them, especially if the agencies do not stick to those plans or deviate from them in a way that damages the local economy. I do not know whether the hon. Lady plays a part in the Regional Select Committee, but hon. Members should not complain about the democratic deficit in terms of the RDAs unless they are prepared to participate in the Select Committees that have been established precisely to hold them to account.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West) (Lab): I have been making complaints on behalf of my constituents for some time about the poor performance of rail services on the section between Milton Keynes and Euston. Those services have been improving but last week there were a series of failures that were the responsibility of Network Rail involving speed restrictions, points failures, loss of signalling and a complete signalling failure, which caused major disruptions. May we have a debate about Network Rail's stewardship of the west coast main line track and its inability to allow the train operators to deliver reliable services for my constituents?

Ms Harman: I know that this issue affects a number of Members. Indeed, it was raised in last week's business questions. I think it would be a useful subject for a Westminster Hall debate and I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done on behalf of her constituents in Milton Keynes, because railway services are an important issue for her constituents.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde) (Con): At its conference yesterday, the NHS Confederation indicated that it believes that, after 2011, the NHS will face the most sustained and severe fall in funding in its history. Given that that is an important ingredient in the requests that have been made for a debate on public expenditure, will the Leader of the House temper her enthusiasm for granting that debate for a moment until the National Audit Office has had a chance to publish an independent report that illustrates what public expenditure actually means—Department by Department—in years two and three of the current public expenditure round? It is clear from what the NHS Confederation says that that is when the Government cuts will bite.

Ms Harman: Obviously, we consider any reports from the NAO and listen to what is said by the NHS Confederation, but nobody could doubt the Government's commitment to the national health service since 1997. We have made a massive investment in hospitals, clinics and in the training of doctors, dentists and nurses, and have given a massive commitment to health services across the board, none of which would have happened had the Conservatives remained in power. If public spending is slashed, the people who will suffer will be those who cannot afford to go private. We will protect public services.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): May I say to my right hon. and learned Friend that when we have the debate on public expenditure, we should examine the Tory 10 per cent. cuts, but it is also important that we should have a balanced debate? Does she agree that we should consider the impact of the Government's public expenditure of the past 12 years on constituencies such as mine, which have seen massive investments of capital expenditure on schools, health care facilities, children's centres, nurseries and sports facilities, with a new running track and a massive refurbishment of the library and learning centre in my constituency. Should we not consider the impact on our constituencies of the Government's public expenditure?

Ms Harman: I will take my hon. Friend's contribution to mean that he adds his weight to the suggestion that we have a debate on the economy, and, in particular, on the effect of capital spending. The important point is that capital spending is not just about jobs, such as those in the construction industry—when the private sector construction has been hard hit, it would be disastrous to cut investment in public capital, which provides jobs—but we also need to continue to invest in education, transport and policing. I shall take his proposals as a suggestion for a topical debate next week.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Con): The Constitutional Renewal Bill was published in draft almost two years ago. It has been the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny and over the past year I have asked questions about this on numerous occasions. Ministers have come to the Dispatch Box 12 times and given a reassurance that the Bill would be published soon or imminently. We have been given that answer 12 times in the past year. The Prime Minister came to the Dispatch Box again yesterday and told us of his apparent commitment to constitutional renewal, but that will appear to be just another empty promise unless the Leader of the House can give us a firm date for the publication of the Constitutional Renewal Bill and its debate in the House.

Ms Harman: Hon. Members will know from the Prime Minister's statement yesterday that certain additional measures on the constitution will be considered apart from those contained in the Constitutional Renewal Bill, which was subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by a Committee of this House and of the House of Lords. The measures in the Bill will be considered, but they will be accompanied by additional measures, the first of which being the subject of the all-party talks that began yesterday—the setting up of a Parliamentary Standards Authority.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have been in the Chair for only a few minutes, but I have a sense of long questions and answers. If I am to try and get every hon. Member in, I should like to request short, single questions, and, I hope, concise answers. I call Dr. Brian Iddon.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. At my advice surgery last Saturday, I received two complaints about the behaviour of private parking companies. The more outrageous involved a woman who took a party of children to a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in my constituency only to find, when she came out, that a hefty fine had been placed under her windscreen wipers. Similar things are happening across the land, and KFC is particularly prone to complaint. My right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) had an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall on the matter last week, so please may we have a topical debate so that all hon. Members can bring the complaints to the Floor of the House? In that way, perhaps we can persuade the companies to behave more decently.

Ms Harman: That might be a good subject for a debate in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Andrew Mackay (Bracknell) (Con): May I gently put it to the Leader of the House that her excellent critique of the British National party was rather spoiled by the suggestion that the official Opposition opposed the Equality Bill? She knows full well that we put down a reasoned amendment and that, when it failed, we supported giving the Bill a Second Reading. Looking at the business for the next two weeks, may I assure her that she need not be worried about the Postal Services Bill not getting through on Second Reading? It has the full support of those on the Opposition Benches.

Ms Harman: I do not see how the Opposition can say that they are in favour of the Equality Bill, given that they did not vote for giving it a Second Reading in this House. They voted against it, and proposed an amendment that used the words

"declines to give the Bill a Second Reading".

In any language, that means that the Opposition were against it, but I believe that there is more agreement in this House about equality than meets the eye. I do not want the Equality Bill to be one of the big dividing lines between Government and Opposition. I would appreciate it if the Opposition would support it, even though they wanted to decline to give it a Second Reading.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am now going to turn to a member of the Chairmen's Panel, who I know will set the House a good example. I call Mr. David Taylor.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May we have a ministerial statement on the future of the Forensic Science Service? Restructuring proposals would lead to a third or more of its staff losing their jobs. As we know, the FSS provides a comprehensive, integrated and world-class service in 120,000 cases a year, from crime scene to courtroom. We really must try to protect that skill base, if at all possible.

Ms Harman: I will ask the new Home Secretary to write to my hon. Friend on that matter.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) (LD): I am not only in favour of the Equality Bill, I am in favour of giving it proper scrutiny, including at Report stage in this House. The Leader of the House will know that I welcome the moves by the Prime Minister to reach all-party agreement on how we can programme that scrutiny better. In the meantime, however, will she accept that she is in charge of the Bill and that, when it comes out of the Public Bill Committee and returns to the Floor of the House, it is up to her to ensure that there is enough time to give all the groups of amendments proper scrutiny? I hope that she will give an assurance that there will be proper consultation and enough time to ensure that all those aspects are covered.

Ms Harman: I certainly want that to be the case. We want to listen to all sides of the House and to have proper scrutiny of the Bill. The hon. Gentleman has been entirely consistent in his concern to ensure that amendments brought forward after Committee stage are scrutinised on the Floor of the House. That is really important, and I hope that the Committee under the chairmanship of the Chair of the Public Administration Committee will be able to look into that, as well as the other matters that it has been asked to consider.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on industrial relations in London Underground? It appears that, before the dispute started at 6 pm two nights ago, the union signed an agreement that would have meant the suspension of the strike. Yet, 35 minutes later, members of the management told the union that they had made a phone call and could no longer abide by the agreement that had just been signed. We need a debate to establish exactly who that phone call was made to, as there is a real suspicion that the fingerprints of the Mayor of London are all over the provocation of the dispute. If the Mayor interfered and caused the suspension of the strike to be lifted, I think hon. Members ought to be made aware of that.

Ms Harman: We want the Mayor of London to play his part in bringing all sides together to make sure that the backbone of London's transport network is working properly for Londoners. We need a proper public transport system, not megaphone diplomacy or soundbites from any side.

I know that I must try to keep my answers as brief as possible, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but, to clear up any possible misunderstanding, I think that the fact of the matter is that George Alagiah was not born in England.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): Next week, Government and Opposition peers will have a free vote on a clause inserted by this House into the Political Parties and Elections Bill that gives candidates in general elections the option of having their full home address on ballot papers—which is what happens at present—or to have their constituency address there instead. True to form, however, the Liberal Democrats in the upper House are imposing a three-line Whip against the clause. They say that they are doing so on the grounds that they want this House to have a better opportunity to debate the matter. If the clause comes back to this House, will the Government guarantee that we will have time to debate it and vote on it again, if necessary?

Ms Harman: We will of course try to make sure that all the issues involved are properly debated when the Bill comes back to this House.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Leader of the House will share my concern and disappointment that flying the flags of the British overseas territories and the Crown dependencies at the trooping the colour ceremony has once again been ignored. I refer her to early-day motion 1644:

[That this House looks forward to the 2009 Trooping the Colour ceremony on Saturday 13 June to mark the Official Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; notes with pride that the flags of all the nations of the Commonwealth are always displayed in and around Horse Guards Parade for this great occasion; and calls on the Government to ensure that the flags of all Her Majesty's Territories are also flown in time for the ceremony, including Her Majesty's Crown Dependencies of the Isle of Man, Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney and Sark, together with Her Majesty's Overseas Territories of Anguilla, Bermuda, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands, St. Helena, Ascension Island, Tristan da Cuhna, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands.]

Will she ensure that the Minister responsible for this great British occasion makes sure that the flags are flown and that we respect all our British territories, as well as countries in the Commonwealth?

Ms Harman: I will draw the hon. Gentleman's point to the attention of the responsible Minister.

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): I was very pleased that the Child Poverty Bill received its First Reading today. Will the Leader of the House say when Second Reading will be, and can she assure me

[Andrew Selous]

that we will not read anything about the Bill in the papers before Members have had a chance to pick it up from the Vote Office tomorrow?

Ms Harman: There has been extensive consultation and discussion already about the Bill to tackle child poverty, as well as statements about its contents. There is a distinction between statements and Bills. If a Secretary of State or a Minister comes to the Dispatch Box to make a statement, Members of the House do not expect to hear the contents of that statement on the radio or television beforehand, with TV and radio interviewers being the first to ask questions. When there is a statement, the first people to ask questions must be Members of this House, but the publication of Bills and consultation papers is a different issue.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on immigration and political correctness? I represent an area where a British National party MEP was elected, and I suggest that people voted for that party not because they endorse its nasty breed of politics but because they are frustrated that the mainstream political parties do not appear to be addressing their legitimate concerns. The way to take on the BNP is not to hire a rent-a-mob to throw eggs at its members and jostle them when they make public statements, but to address the issues that are leading so many people to vote for the party out of frustration, even though that is misguided.

Ms Harman: Throughout history and across Europe, people's fears about their jobs and their standard of living has always provided an opportunity for far-right parties to stir up apprehension. That is why we are so determined to step in. We will not just say that the recession should take its course, or that unemployment is a price worth paying, and we do not accept that people who lose their jobs will lose their house. Instead, we will provide real help for people in tough times and make sure that we take every action that we can to tackle the problems of the global economic crisis. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that there is no place in British national life or in our democracy for a party that excludes people because of the colour of their skin.

Mr. Bone: Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust is closing a hospital outpatients facility in my constituency and moving it to a small town in another constituency. The matter will come before the local planning committee. The chief executive of the trust has said that unless the planning committee approves the proposal, it is likely that the whole scheme will be dropped. May we have a debate on the accountability of the chief executives of NHS foundation trusts who clearly try to blackmail a planning committee?

Ms Harman: Perhaps I should draw that to the attention of Health Ministers, and perhaps they could write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): May we have a debate on the future of the distribution industry? Cities such as Milton Keynes are, because of their geographical location, traditionally the home of many such companies. Unfortunately, as a result of rising fuel and vehicle duty, many of those companies are struggling. For example, this week, TK Maxx in Milton Keynes closed its distribution centre, with the loss of 275 jobs, and moved it to Poland. What does it say about the policies of this Government when companies feel that they have to move their businesses to Poland, rather than stay in Milton Keynes?

Ms Harman: One of the most important tasks of the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is to make sure that we get the right climate to enable businesses of all sizes—large, medium and small—to survive, make it through the downturn, and flourish in this country, and to have a more prosperous future.

Points of Order

12.31 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. A number of hon. Members convened this morning at 8.55 am to attend the Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee to consider the draft Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2009. The Committee was abandoned and cancelled at very short notice—at 5 minutes to 6 o'clock last night—causing inconvenience not only to us but more especially to staff, who travelled long distances in desperate circumstances today, during the tube strike. Much more worrying to the wider public is the fact that the amending regulations—

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): They are very important.

Miss McIntosh: Yes, and they are due to take effect on 7 July. The regulations are hugely out of date; they should have been brought into force on 1 May 2008. No explanation was given for the cancellation of the Committee; we were told that it was due to unforeseen circumstances. That means that businesses have extremely short notice of the need to implement the provisions, which, as I say, are due to come into effect on 7 July. The cost is estimated to be £95.7 million to businesses, charities and voluntary bodies, and £2 million to the public sector.

I ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to use your good offices to ask the Leader of the House, while she is in the Chamber, when we can expect the regulations to come before the House. We are prepared to consider them and give them proper scrutiny, but it is unacceptable for the Committee to have been cancelled at the shortest possible notice. I am sure that many hon. Members, and the staff who were asked to assist us in considering the regulations, were not made aware of the cancellation. It is unacceptable to cancel at such short notice.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): First, I regret it if inconvenience was caused to Members and staff in the way the hon. Lady described. I am conscious of the fact that, through a typographical error in documentation, another Committee of the House had a slight mishap in its timings, but the situation was not as drastic as that which she described. As to the substance of her point, I am sure that she understands that I cannot rule on that from the Chair, but she has had the opportunity to put her point on the record. Perhaps, if she was seeking an answer from the Leader of the House, her point might have been better put as a question during business questions. However, she has made her point. The Leader of the House may seek to pursue the matter through a point of order, but I am unable to make any ruling.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Ms Harriet Harman): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) had given me a bit of notice, and had asked a question in business questions, I would have sought the opportunity to answer her question. I am not able to give her the precise answer that she needs now, but I will look into the matter. If it appears to be helpful to do so, the Deputy Leader of the House or I might pop up with a point of order later, so that the House can know what the position is regarding that Committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I do not think that we can do better than that.

BILL PRESENTED

Child Poverty Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr. Stephen Timms, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Ed Balls, Secretary Yvette Cooper, Mr. Liam Byrne, Jim Knight, Dawn Primarolo, Helen Goodman and Kitty Ussher, presented a Bill to set targets relating to the eradication of child poverty, and to make other provision about child poverty.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 112) with explanatory notes (Bill 112-EN).

Carers

[Relevant documents: The Fourth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Session 2007-08, HC 485-I, on Valuing and Supporting Carers, and the Government's response, First Special Report of the Committee, Session 2008-09, HC 105.]

Topical debate

12.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of carers.

I am pleased to open this debate on carers during national carers week. The way we look after people with care and support needs defines us as a society. Everyone, at some point in their lives, will know and love someone who needs care. Many of us will need care ourselves, for whatever reason. It is an indication of the strength of our society that every day, between 5 million and 6 million people care for their family members. They do an incredible job, often giving up a huge amount to care for someone they love. Carers are not a group separate from the rest of society—they are society.

Through the 10-year carers strategy, which, as some hon. Members will remember, we launched almost exactly a year ago today, the Government want all carers to be universally recognised and valued as being fundamental to strong families and stable communities. That is the unifying vision for the future of our long-term strategy. We want support that is tailored to meet an individual's needs. We want carers to be able to care for the ones whom they love and still enjoy a life of their own. We demand recognition that both carers and the cared for are full and equal citizens.

We have a lot to do before we realise that vision but, one year on, we are on our way. One person who will help us to realise that vision is the chair of the standing commission on carers. I am delighted to announce to the House that Dr. Philippa Russell has been appointed to that role. I want to place on record my thanks to her and all members of the commission for the work that they are doing to develop, implement and monitor the strategic vision, alongside the cross-Government programme board that has been established, and of course the inter-ministerial group, which I chair.

I want to begin by recognising the particular contribution and needs of young carers. We have a special duty to support young carers and to protect them from excessive caring burdens and inappropriate caring roles. As part of our £75-million Think Family programme to support all families at risk, the Department for Children, Schools and Families has set up six extended family pathfinders for young carers. The Department of Health is supporting those pathfinders to test how we can better support families with young carers. We believe that young people who have caring responsibilities for a family member should not be denied the right to enjoy their childhood, and to grow up like every other child.

Yesterday, together with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), who is the Minister with responsibility for disability, I met carers in Islington and Camden at the official launch of the new website and telephone helpline for carers, Carers Direct, which I will say more about in a moment. One of the concerns that people there raised was the lack of awareness of the needs of carers among the host of different organisations and individuals whom they encounter in the health service and on local councils. I agree with them that it is important that professionals and others who offer support for carers understand their needs. That is why, over the next two years, Skills for Care and Skills for Health will develop a range of new training programmes and awareness-raising modules about carers for those professionals. We have also commissioned the Royal College of General Practitioners to develop training for GPs, based on the new action guide for primary care, to help GPs better understand carers' needs.

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East) (Lab): Of course we all welcome training for professionals in the field. In common with many other hon. Members, I met some carers in my constituency on Friday. One of the issues that came up was training for carers, not the professionals. One constituent said that she had gone on a training course that had dealt with the particular complex issues affecting her son. She said that she could not express of what huge benefit that was to her in understanding his condition and disability. I know that some research projects are going on, but I ask the Minister to consider training for carers as well as professionals.

Phil Hope: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to that matter. I will say more about it in a moment. I know that he is a real champion for carers in his constituency. We have a training programme, which I shall say more about later, called Caring with Confidence, which is not for professionals; it is for carers, and is delivered by carers, which I think is unique. That is extra work that we are doing. He is right to highlight the issue, and we are responding directly to the concerns that he raises on behalf of his constituents.

It is really important that GPs understand the additional help that there is for carers, so that when a carer goes to them with health needs, they not only help to meet those requirements but signpost—refer—the carer to other sources of support in their area.

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): The Minister referred to extended family pathfinders, and I was waiting for a little more expansion on that theme, but he moved on rather quickly. Will he explain how the scheme will be co-ordinated? Will its co-ordination be the function of health services, social services, education or GPs?

Phil Hope: I shall happily write to the hon. Lady to give her those further details. The pathfinders scheme operates through the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Its purpose is to look at the needs of families—as a whole—that are in stress or in areas of disadvantage, which find it difficult to get through life as a family and have complicated caring arrangements and responsibilities, and to understand what works when building a package of support around a family. We want to pilot and test those things in different settings—rural, urban and so on—so that we can understand what families need. However, I shall write to her to detail where they are, how they are funded and so on, so that she understands those points.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way on the point about support care packages, because one of my constituents sadly died after a support package was not put in place. Mr. Tonkin starved himself to death in a care home while waiting to return to his family. It took more than five months to begin putting a care package together, but still it never came together, despite the family wishing to support Mr. Tonkin's return to his own home. I therefore caution the Minister, because introducing new structures might sound very good, but we currently have structures—in terms of carers and care packages—that are not working.

Phil Hope: The hon. Lady will understand that I cannot comment on a particular case, because I do not know the details. However, I do know that we have to do both: drive up the standards of residential and domiciliary care throughout the country. I am therefore delighted that the Government have given not only ordinary grants to local authorities, but an additional £520 million to help the process of transforming social care and raising the quality of care throughout the country. Responsibility for the quality of care rests with the Care Quality Commission, which conducts inspections of care homes and others who might provide the care to which she refers.

There is also a separate complaints process in place, which the hon. Lady—on behalf of her constituents and, indeed, the family of her constituent—can use, particularly in respect of local authorities, if an individual has not received the care that would be expected. She can use the complaints process to take the matter forward.

Anne Main: Will the Minister give way?

Phil Hope: I shall happily give way to the hon. Lady, although the debate is moving on.

Anne Main: I should not like to leave the Minister with the wrong impression that the care home was at fault; it was the inability to put a care package together, through the Department for Children, Schools and Families, so that the family could have Mr. Tonkin go home. The care home itself treated him very well, apparently. I do not wish to leave the Minister with the impression that it was a poor care home.

Phil Hope: I am grateful for that clarification.

I shall move on to respite care, because we know that caring for someone can be hard. Six out of 10 carers say that the biggest thing that we can do to help them is to give them a break. That message was repeated by the carers whom I met at Centre 404 in Islington yesterday. Since we introduced the carers grant in 1999, more than £1 billion has been provided to councils to do just that. The grant is worth £240 million this year and will increase to £256 million next year. It includes £25 million a year for councils to respond immediately to carers who are in a crisis and can no longer care for their loved one. Encouraging the national health service to recognise that support for carers is as much an issue for it as it is for local councils and social care, so we have allocated an additional £150 million to primary care trusts between 2009 and 2011 to work with their local authority partners to provide personalised breaks for carers.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): My constituency has a very high percentage of disabled people, because of past industrial disease, and a very high percentage of elderly people. Many carers are being short-changed by an outdated benefits system, which simply does not recognise the enormous contribution that carers make to looking after people who need them to stay at home and give up their jobs in order to assist them. What does my hon. Friend have to say on that point?

Phil Hope: I shall come on to allowances and benefits in a few moments, but my right hon. Friend is right to suggest that there is a concern about whether the combination of allowances and benefits works in the best way, because it is a complicated system. Whatever the processes are for reviewing, developing and reforming that process, however, right here and now help is at hand, because individuals can go to the new website that I have described, look at the benefits system and allowances, see what they qualify for and ensure that they get all their entitlements to help them get through the situation.

Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I thank the Minister for this morning seeing the Swale carers group, whose members are listening in the Gallery. If we included Skype on that website, we could connect carers and enable them to talk to each other and share their experiences. It is the isolation that they feel most of all. Will that provision be on the site?

Phil Hope: I did enjoy meeting, just before the debate, the Swale carers group, whose members are here to—I hope—listen to and take back messages from the House about the support that is available for carers. Carers Direct, the new website, has an interactive facility, and my hon. Friend is right to point out that people feel isolated. I do not know whether many carers blog, but there is a blogging facility on the site. People can literally type in their thoughts, feelings and problems, and watch and listen to other people with similar problems and share information. That facility will break down the barriers for many people who feel isolated in the very important role that they carry out.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Minister talked about NHS funding and £150 million that has been allocated over two years, but will he say more about how carers and others will be able to track how it is spent in order to assure themselves that their primary care trusts allocate it and spend it on carers' needs?

Phil Hope: I know that the hon. Gentleman, speaking as a Liberal Democrat, is fully supportive of devolution and of devolving responsibility for resources and decision making to a local level. He will know that the additional £150 million that we have put into PCT budgets, although not ring-fenced, is for the purpose to which he referred. Part of his responsibilities as a local MP, along with those of carers, might be to ensure that the local primary care trust understands the needs of carers, does the job that it should be doing to assess people's needs and ensures that it allocates from its budget the money that the Government have allocated to it to support carers in the area. I hope that he works with local carers to ensure as much—and, indeed, that every Member works with local carers to ensure that local primary care trusts and authorities carry out proper needs assessments and the proper development of programmes and policies to support carers, who do such a fantastic job throughout the country.

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous. He mentioned, in addition to health service funding, funding to local authorities. My constituents in Wiltshire will be slightly baffled by that, however, because the county is at the very bottom of the league table for revenue support grant to local authorities. Will he therefore say a little more about how the extra funding has been distributed among local authorities, and the formula that has been used?

Phil Hope: I do not have the facts and figures about the hon. Gentleman's local authority, but I know that local authorities have had a record 45 per cent. increase in Government funding in real terms over the past 12 years. As a result, local authorities have improved dramatically the quality of a whole range of services in their areas. In addition, the carers grant that I mentioned has been distributed to local authorities. I do not have the figures on how much his local authority has received, but I assure him that it will have had some. I hope that he will put pressure on his local authority, which is almost certainly controlled by members of his own party, to ensure that it gives to local carers the priority that we expect in its assessment and delivery of services, and that it makes the right choices to provide resources to the most vulnerable and caring people in our society.

We want innovation to be at the heart of everything that we do for carers, so, as part of the carers strategy, we are setting up 24 sites to test, demonstrate and evaluate good practice in support for carers. That action will improve outcomes for carers and provide value for money, and the sites will look at health and well-being checks for carers, breaks for carers and how the NHS can better support them.

Yesterday, on the first anniversary of the carers strategy, we launched Carers Direct, which will give people from all backgrounds—young, old and those with disabilities—access to the information and advice that they need. They will be able to support and talk to each other through the website.

Mr. Kemp: With the best will in the world, Members of Parliament will have met, and national carers week will have involved meetings with, a minuscule number of carers. Millions of carers out there have a sense of isolation because of the 24/7 nature of the caring that they do. Any investment in technology that will link and bring people together, so that they can get over the sense of isolation, is great. Furthermore, can Members of Parliament have information so that through our local press we can try to make people aware of the issues? Carers often live in isolated conditions.

Phil Hope: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For those people—I shall not stereotype them—who find it less easy to access websites, there is also a telephone helpline. Anyone can ring that and get direct, face-to-face—or mouth-to-mouth—contact, so that they can discuss their needs. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure that I got the phrasing right there; never mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker—you know what I meant.

The helpline, as well as the website, is important. We need to break down people's isolation. Carers need advice. We know that the system is complicated and that people do not understand the benefits and allowances available to them. They may not know what is available in their areas. If they get on the website or use the helpline, they can find out more and access the support that they need to do their job better and reduce the sense of isolation mentioned by my hon. Friend.

A comprehensive strategy goes far wider than the remit of the Department of Health, so we are working across Government to improve the lives and conditions of carers. Like other constituency MPs, I regularly meet carers and take up their individual concerns in my own constituency. I have had the privilege of meeting lots of carers this week, as part of carers week. One subject that has continually come up is carers benefits. The Government accept that we have to look again at that issue. I remind the House, however, that we have already given a lot of support. Last year, for example, we provided nearly £1.5 billion in carer's allowance to support carers. That, along with the carer's premium and other income-related benefits, forms a vital part of the financial package of support for carers.

For carers who work or want to work, the Department for Work and Pensions has increased the amount that someone can earn while still receiving carer's allowance, from £50 a week in 2001 to £95 a week now—one of the highest earning limits of any benefit. Given the complexities of the benefit system for pensioners, we have also taken steps to simplify the claiming process for pensioners who are carers—they might, for example, qualify for the carer's premium in pension credits.

We need to do more. Even now, as I discuss pension credits, allowances and benefits, I know that people will worry about the complexity. Last December's welfare reform White Paper reaffirmed our commitment to look carefully at carers benefits. We do not want to make the benefits system even more complex; frankly, carers' lives are complicated enough already. That is why the Department wants to make any changes to benefits not only in the context of the social care system, but alongside its wider ambitions for welfare reform, so that the changes lead to a long-lasting and tailored system of support.

For many carers, there is more to life than simply fulfilling their caring responsibilities. If carers want to work, we want to help them do so. We want to step in, not step aside. Let us give—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am afraid that the Minister has used up his time allocation. He has been generous in allowing interventions, but time has been added for that.

12.53 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): It is good to have this opportunity to debate the issues affecting carers across the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to all those who care for relatives and friends. It is a taxing and often thankless task, and it is right that the House should pay tribute to them. Well over 200 right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have signed early-day motions 1519 and 1355 in support of carers week. That stands as our debt of gratitude.

I also pay tribute to the organisations that support carers, particularly Carers UK, the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, the countless local support groups and the online carers' chat rooms and information sources, which

are increasingly important for mutual support—a point made by the hon. Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) a moment ago. I pay tribute also to all those involved in organising carers week. That is now in its 14th year, which is testament to its effectiveness in highlighting carers' concerns and needs.

According to Carers UK, there are about 6 million carers in the UK and more than three in five people will become carers at some time in our lives. I was interested that the Minister said yesterday in the departmental press release that there were only 5 million carers, as opposed to the 6 million identified in the 2001 census. Have the Government done a recalculation? If so, will the Minister put into the Library evidence of how many carers there are? Perhaps he will catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to cover that point.

Too often, carers bear the brunt of inadequate provision of care and support. They are among those who are suffering the most because there has been prevarication on reform, not least on the part of the Government. Help the Aged and others have called for carers to be supported as an integral part of the care and support system. I am sure that other hon. Members will speak in more detail about the Select Committee report. It is one of the indicative issues of this debate that a Department of Health Minister and his shadow should be leading the discussion on a Department for Work and Pensions report—a report that certainly has ramifications for the Department for Communities and Local Government, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Cabinet Office, among other Departments. It is important to note that the health and well-being of carers rightly dominate the concerns and focus of carers and those for whom they care.

The report can be condensed into two main areas. The first is soft support for carers—inclusion in Government policy across the board, information services and so on. The second is discussion of carers' wages and benefits and the issues faced by carers who are in employment. That raises pertinent questions of the Minister about where we are up to on the carers strategy. We want not a list of pledges, but a list of what has been done to date. One specific issue is whether primary care trusts are actually using the money provided for emergency-only respite care for the purpose for which it was intended. Will the Minister clarify that point, which relates to what the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) said a moment ago?

The Government are very good at dragging their feet on such pledges. Yesterday, the Minister announced a hotline for carers in Islington. Carers had called for that and welcomed it, but it was first promised in the 1999 carers strategy, on almost the same day as I first entered the House following a by-election. The hotline was reannounced in the updated strategy and was supposed to have been in place early this year. The House will be aware that the Government have been similarly slow in setting up the national flu helpline—a key part of their pandemic flu plan. What confidence can anyone have in a Government who take 10 years to set up a phone line?

Last year, the Prime Minister and the previous Secretary of State for Health trailed a carers' wage in the press before the publication of the strategy. Will the Minister confirm that that, in the end, was just more spin? It only ever referred to an extension of direct payments to spending on carers—and not even that has happened. Obviously, the biggest step forward for carers will be reform in the long-term care system. The Government's financial squeeze has led to rising eligibility criteria at the local level, and too often carers bridge the gap. So I ask the Minister again: in carers week, of all weeks, and before spring technically ends in a few days' time on 21 June, where is the Green Paper that the Government have categorically promised and guaranteed?

For 11 years, the Government have ignored a particular issue. Tony Blair told the 1997 Labour party conference that he did not want his children to grow up in a country where people had to sell their houses to fund their long-term care. Since then, we have had the Wanless report from the King's Fund, in 2006. We also had a "zero-based review", announced by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Byrne) in response to the Wanless report in 2006, but there is no evidence of any serious work having been done on it.

The hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) said in the House that he thought that the comprehensive spending review 2008 would deliver a solution. The CSR announced a Green Paper, to be preceded by a consultation on the future of care and support. A Green Paper is, by definition, a consultation too. That Green Paper was due in early 2009, March 2009, spring 2009, and June 2009. Can the Minister confirm that the timetable in the departmental plan is now—surprise, surprise—summer 2009: that is, by September?

Next week, we will be taking the Health Bill through its Committee stage. I was pleased that Lord Darzi, under pressure from his peers, amended the Bill to add carers as a group who must be consulted on the NHS constitution. I was astounded by that omission and the neglect on the part of the Government. The Bill currently defines carers as

"persons who, as relatives or friends, care for other persons to whom NHS services are being provided".

That seems a somewhat draconian contraction by the Government of the definition of a carer already inscribed in the Health and Social Care Act 2008, which has the broader definition of

"people who care for service users as relatives or friends",

with no other qualification. Why are the Government seeking to reduce the statistics on carers?

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): In support of my hon. Friend's case, does he think that part of the problem is the dissonance between what the Government say about the importance of carers and the fact that carers' interests tend to slip so regularly off the Government's priority agenda?

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who chairs, admirably and with great credit from both sides of the House, the all-party group on dementia, which has a major read-across to all the concerns of carers. He is right. It is no good to lay out so many expectations across the board, particularly for people in hard-working and sensitive areas such as caring, only for them to be dashed when the rhetoric does not convert into action. One of the greatest challenges that we face as politicians is to hold the Government to account on the expectations that they have raised.

I want briefly to touch on the subject of young carers. It was, to say the least, slightly concerning that although

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

the Health Committee discussed young carers in its report, the Government's written response completely omitted to mention them. The Minister must have realised the Government's embarrassment about that, because he briefly alluded to young carers in his opening remarks. I hope that that embarrassment will now be covered by the Government making a specific acknowledgement that they need to address the issue of young carers in a written document whereby they can be held to account. They may therefore need to issue an addendum to their response.

The 2001 census found that there were approximately 175,000 young carers in the UK, although that figure is believed to be higher by those who work in the field and see things for themselves. The average age of young carers is an absolutely shocking 12 years old. One in three regularly misses school, and one in four has no external support whatever. That has led to tragedies such as that of Deanne Asamoah. When will the Government take action? Following the Minister's acknowledgement that the needs of young carers must be addressed, given their absence from the Government's response, we need to move from words to a good set of actions that can be implemented and will support young carers.

It is right for the House to be debating issues facing carers. They are, as those involved in carers week have put it, a "secret service", so it is right that this House should do all it can to bring them out of the shadows, and that the Government should do all they can to support them. Conservative Members thank carers for the sacrifices that they make in order to improve the lives of others and their loved ones, and recognise that helping carers is one of the best ways to help those they are caring for. Most importantly, we join third party organisations in calling on the Government to publish the Green Paper on care and support without any further delay. Only in the debate about reform can carers begin to hope for a system that does not let them down. If, as seems increasingly likely, the Government cannot get beyond the stasis of a divided and leaderless party, for the sake of carers and all those in our society who need help, the Minister should urge the Prime Minister to call a general election.

1.4 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I know that there are hon. Members in all parts of the House who are hoping to catch your eye. I come to the debate to represent several of my constituents who are carers or who work for caring organisations.

In responding to my earlier intervention, the Minister referred to the need for MPs to play a part in ensuring that the NHS spends the £150 million that has been allocated over the next two years wisely and well in order properly to meet the needs of carers. I can assure him that in my area not only am I well in touch with carers, but carers make sure that I am in touch with their concerns. We have a very effective carers' centre run by the Princess Royal Trust for Carers, which has now been there for more than 20 years. It was opened in the 1980s, as probably one of the first of its kind to be established, and it is highly regarded by all the carers who have been through its doors over all those years.

My reason for speaking is to convey to the Minister and Members in the House several comments that were made to me by carers at an event that I attended yesterday as part of carers week. I invited them to put their comments in writing. They particularly feature carers' concerns about the inadequacy of the benefits regime that relates to the carer's allowance and so on. There is a strong sense that this issue is well overdue for attention. It has been the subject of plenty of reports from Government, yet they are still not addressing it. Ken Fish, a carer in my constituency, asked:

> "Why should Carer's Allowance be stopped when the carer receives old age pension at 60 for women and 65 for men, when carers are entitled to Carer's Allowance for caring for more than 35 hours per week and when the same carers have paid National Insurance Contributions or have had credits paid for them when they are continuing to care as both they and their cared for get older, frailer and less mobile?"

That is at the heart of many of the representations that I am sure will be received by hon. Members on both sides of the House. Margaret Burrows said:

> "Older people that are carers need more help and support to continue in their caring role. No age restrictions for receiving Carer's Allowance. I feel unappreciated by society for being a carer, in particular for those carers caring for someone with mental health problems."

Another carer I met at the coffee morning, Pat Rogerson, said that she received a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions saying that she was entitled to the carer's allowance, but when she read on a little further she found that the next paragraph said that she could not get the carer's allowance because she was getting a pension. She asks why a letter like that is sent, and why she is not being paid the carer's allowance. June Baine, Rhona Banford, Jill Winder and Christine Holmes also want that question answered.

Although the Minister was helpful in explaining the complexities of the current system, he did not go on to say either of two things: that the Government honestly do not believe that this is a financial priority and feel that it cannot be afforded at this time—that would be the straightforward thing for him to say—or that there is a timetable by which the level of the carer's allowance will be raised and its eligibility extended, so that pensioners, who often shoulder some of the greatest burdens of carers, will get proper recognition in the payments that they receive.

Jeremy Wright: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we cannot afford not to do something about this issue? If carers decided—I am sure that very few of them would wish to do so—that they could no longer shoulder such burdens, and the state was asked instead to do the work that they do unpaid, we would end up with a very much greater liability on the taxpayer.

Mr. Burstow: It is estimated that our 6 million carers are worth £87 billion in the burden that they shift from our public services—both social care and the health service. Taking on that responsibility affects their physical and financial health in the long term. We know from the statistics that were published during last year's national carers week that many carers find that by the time they have finished their caring role, their earnings potential

has been diminished and their savings have been run down, and they feel let down as a consequence.

It is good to have a national strategy that outlines many aspirations, which will be shared by everyone in this House and beyond it, but setting ambitions for 2018 makes them seem an awfully long time away. The message that I have heard from carers who are caring today is that they cannot wait for those ambitions to be realised by 2018, or for the carer's allowance to be raised at some point in the future. Can the Minister therefore guarantee that the Government will shortly set out a timetable for the very necessary reform of the carer's allowance?

I wonder also whether the Minister could say a little more about the time scale for the roll-out of the national strategy. It is not entirely clear what the milestones are and how carers on the ground can satisfy themselves about the strategy and hold people to account locally for delivering it. At the event that I attended yesterday, Lorraine Brown said that better services for carers of young people and for the cared-for, such as younger people with dementia, were particularly important. All too often, dementia services for people who become senile at an early age are inadequate. They are often put with older people suffering from dementia, in a setting entirely inappropriate for them. More needs to be done to cater for that group, and that is certainly a concern that Lorraine Brown has.

Jackie Ure wanted to make the point yesterday that carers have a sense of struggle and of navigating their way through a complex system. All too often there is no one there to guide them, hold their hand and support them until they turn up at the door of the carers centre in Sutton, where that support is provided. That situation is replicated up and down the country, with people waiting for an assessment, battling to get the right care plan implemented and then ensuring that the financial assessments do not financially cripple the individual concerned. All those matters make caring a burden that it should not be. It is a burden that people willingly take on, and we should not be making it worse through the systems that we construct around people.

I have not spoken at great length today, but I wanted to represent my constituents who willingly shoulder that burden for children, loved ones, husbands, wives and others. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some reassurance about what will happen in respect of the carer's allowance, and some sense that he understands that it is not good enough for him to say to MPs simply that we have to hold our local PCTs to account. He has a responsibility to ensure that PCTs put their money where their mouth is and deliver for carers.

1.11 pm

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): Like other Members, I welcome this debate, particularly as it is happening during carers week. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Prime Minister, who met the all-party carers group a few weeks ago. As someone who this year has been designated the parliamentary champion for carers, I was delighted to join that meeting. The Prime Minister over the past two years, and his predecessor, have given carers great support and started to put carers issues higher up the political agenda. All political parties now recognise them as an important focus for social policy.

I was delighted to be invited by a consortium of 10 organisations to be this year's parliamentary champion, and to host yesterday's reception in the Commons. I am delighted that so many MPs attended that reception to hear for themselves, in an informal way, some of the issues that have an impact on carers' lives. We should pay tribute to the many organisations up and down the country that have participated in this week's events. As I understand it from the consortium that Carers UK pulled together, more than 1,000 partner organisations are celebrating the contribution that carers make to our society and taking the opportunity to highlight the issues and continue the pressure on Government, and indeed on all political parties, to ensure that we do not lose momentum in improving the lives of carers.

In my constituency the Princess Royal Trust for Carers held its own event yesterday, which was linked with its annual general meeting. I had hoped to attend, but obviously yesterday's parliamentary business made that impossible. I pay particular tribute to the Stirling Princess Royal Trust for Carers for the work that it does, particularly in supporting young carers. Many of us recognise that all sorts of fairly young children take on responsibilities way above their age level, which they should not be asked to do. I do not want us to say to children, "Of course you can't participate in the care of a parent or sibling," but we must ensure that those children's needs and rights are not neglected as they absorb caring responsibilities that they should not have to take on. The trust in Stirling certainly does a lot of good work in that area.

Over the past 10 years, as I said, carers' issues have come up the political agenda, and we should pay tribute to this Government. In 1999, the first ever carers strategy was developed. Although it was 10 years ago, we should not lose sight of that. It was the first time that any Government had actually recognised that serious needs were being neglected. As the Minister said, the new strategy published last year built on that first strategy but recognised that times had moved on, and carers' interests and issues are perhaps better articulated now than they were in 1999. Indeed, the pressure groups on carers issues have built on that first recognition in 1999.

I met representatives of the Swale carers group this morning, as did the Minister. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Derek Wyatt) was very keen to encourage his local carers group to engage not just with the Minister but with me. One thing that came out of that discussion, and which is embedded in the new carers strategy, was the fact that carers need to be respected as expert care partners. Often they are marginalised by health professionals, not because the health professionals are bad people but because they do not see the carers who are with a sick or disabled person day in and day out. Somehow when it comes to big decisions that need to be made, they feel marginalised.

One woman told me this morning that when she moved from one PCT area to another, there was a different attitude to her involvement. In the first area she was very much part of the team, but when she moved house to another PCT area she found that she was totally excluded. Confidentiality clauses were somehow brought into the discussion, and she was not allowed to be a full participant.

Jeremy Wright: I am sure that the right hon. Lady was as encouraged as I was to hear the Minister talk earlier about the training of those professionals and helping them understand more about the role that carers play. I am sure that she hopes, as I do, that that training will involve an understanding of how to respect the experience and understanding that carers develop about the people they care for, so that what she has just described happens rather less often.

Mrs. McGuire: I thoroughly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I recognise, however, that there is sometimes tension between the right of carers to know things and the individual right of a sick or disabled person not to allow anybody else to know their private medical business. That is difficult to manage, and the group this morning recognised that those are fine distinctions. Somebody said to me that we need to get rid of the grey areas, but I say to the Minister that sometimes the grey areas actually help in managing that delicate balance of rights and responsibilities between carers and the individual sick or disabled person who is being cared for. We need to be careful that we do not over-structure such relationships, because we could end up in a slightly worse situation. However, I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: The hon. Lady was making an interesting point, just before she answered the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright), about how both the cared-for and the carers are experts in the care required. Given that the Health Bill is about to go into Committee, and that some of the clauses that we will consider deal with direct payments—I rather hope that the hon. Lady will be asked to serve on that Committee—may I ask here whether any of her discussions this morning helped her to see that the extension of direct payments is one way in which those experts in their own care can have better control over the care that they receive? Did she think about how we might consider extending those direct payments?

Mrs. McGuire: In my previous role I helped pilot individual budgets, which build on the direct payments experience, so I am sure the hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to learn that I am keen that that sort of control should be implemented. We can call it a personalisation agenda, or independence, choice and control, but I know that the Government are also keen on it so that individuals can make decisions about their own lives. The hon. Gentleman may not have made the point explicitly, but his intervention implies that he believes that such a step means that people will be recognised as the real experts on managing their own lives, whether they are sick or disabled people, or carers.

I hope that we all recognise that the carers strategy reflects some of the issues that have been brought to the attention of many of us in the past week, and in recent years. They include the inappropriateness of young children being the principal carers in a family. I know from my conversations with the Minister that he is keen to ensure that that is tackled as soon as possible.

Another element that we should never forget is that carers should have a life of their own. It is sometimes easy to put people into little boxes; that ticks other little boxes further down the line. However, carers need the space and capacity to lead their own lives. That can mean working, which involves tricky balancing. I have some personal experience, with my sisters, of trying to balance care for my mother, who was dying, with our work commitments. Carers also need time to enjoy themselves and to do things that keep them connected to their own social networks, as opposed to always being part of somebody else's network. We should not lose sight of that.

I hope that the Minister accepts that the importance of the strategy was reinforced by the publication of figures this week by Carers UK. They show that 86 per cent. of people in this country believe that carers make a valuable contribution to society; indeed, they are only just behind nurses and firefighters. That reflects very well on the way in which that organisation has pushed the issue up the agenda. The figures also show that the overwhelming majority of people believe that benefits are too low, and that 74 per cent. of carers have reached breaking point as a result of pressure—often the pressure of trying to work their way through bureaucracy. Somebody described that to me as like trying to swim through treacle. I shall not elaborate on that: it conjures up an image of what it must be like to try to tend to and support someone, yet find that there is no one-stop shop and no single route to getting help. I welcome the Minister's comments about trying to make that route easier.

My question for the Minister is, given that the strategy was published last year, how much progress has been made and how is it monitored? Are the milestones, which were carefully laid out in the strategy and worked on with carers, being reached? How will any slippage be addressed?

As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) said, the big elephant in the room is benefits, and the carer's allowance. As someone who wrestled with the problem for three and a half years as a Minister, I say to my colleague that it will not disappear. We should recognise the origin of carer's allowance. Lord Morris, as Minister for disabled people at the time, introduced it as a £10 "thank you" to carers—that was how it was interpreted. Those were gentler, different times. However, carer's allowance has never recovered from being that "thank you" payment in terms of the amount of money that is given. It has always been the lowest benefit and, frankly, it causes great confusion, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam highlighted, and sometimes anger.

The problem of the so-called overlapping benefit rules was raised again this morning, and has been raised with me in my constituency.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way again. She said that carer's allowance was regarded from its inception as some sort of expression of the gratitude of the nation to carers. Is not part of the problem the cliff edge that emerges at retirement for carers who reach retirement age and are no longer entitled to carer's allowance? It is now regarded as an income replacement measure, so people who retire are not allowed to continue to receive carer's allowance, and that causes difficulty in trying to replace it with something else, which carers may not be as confident about claiming. Does she have any reflections on that subject?

Mrs. McGuire: Carer's allowance is an income replacement benefit, as is the state pension. We think of the state pension as being somehow different from a

benefit, but technically that is what it is. Both are income replacement benefits, and that is where the difficulty arises with overlapping benefit. However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman gives the Government credit for trying to mitigate some of the cliff-edge effects of reaching state pension age. Before the Government were elected, carers fell off a benefit "cliff" when they reached state retirement age and carer's benefit stopped immediately. The Government ensured that a carer's premium was incorporated in pension credit, which means that the individual's total income is not reduced.

However, that does not address the fundamental problem. How does one explain to parents who have looked after their disabled child from the hour the child was born, and received carer's allowance through most of that child's life, that when they reach 60 their caring responsibilities are no longer recognised? The Government have wrestled with the problem and I hope that, as part of the roll-out of our welfare programme, we can consider how to improve on the current situation. I hope that we can find a way round the overlapping rule. Perhaps it means designating carer's allowance as something other than an income replacement benefit. However, we must all recognise that that comes with a significant cost, and there is no point in politicians who do not currently have to make those decisions calling for that to happen without examining the costs of delivering it. It does not come cheap, but I hope that the Government will continue to keep it under consideration.

We recognise that caring responsibilities will touch us all at some point in our lives, either as carers or as those receiving care. Yesterday at the reception, two carers, Janice Clark and Valerie Rossiter, gave their personal testimony. Both made powerful statements about their lives and how they had been affected by caring responsibilities. Valerie's experiences were particularly moving. She explained her situation so graphically that it is difficult for me to interpret it for the House today. She has been married for 42 years, yet now her husband does not know who she is. He is in the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease. She said, "This is the man I loved, and now he doesn't know who I am." That is the emotional toll that caring takes on an individual. She was philosophical about some of the battles that she had to fight. She said that although her husband is suffering, although she sometimes has to swim through the bureaucratic treacle, and although she will continue to look after him for the rest of his life, what keeps her going is wanting her experiences to be an example to ensure that other carers do not need to confront some of the difficulties that she has had to face.

I want to pay tribute to the Government's response over the years to the problems that affect carers. However, we all recognise that the battle has not yet been won. We still need to continue building on the solid foundation that we have created. We still need to recognise that carers are the glue that keeps many families together, and by so doing keeps communities together. I hope that in his response the Minister will continue to pledge his support on the issues that affect the lives of 5 million or 6 million carers. In some ways, the numbers do not matter: we just know that a lot of people out there are taking responsibility, and that one day we too may have to accept that responsibility in our own families.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am now going to call the Liberal Democrat spokesman, but I should just explain that under the rules governing topical debates, he has six minutes, plus an added minute for any intervention that he chooses to take.

1.30 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds, North-West) (LD): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I will certainly keep my comments within that time.

I welcome this hugely important debate, in this hugely important week. I echo the comments of other hon. Members in paying tribute to the amazing contribution to society that carers make up and down the country, in enabling loved ones to continue living their lives in a loving environment and with dignity, which we would all warmly support. I also pay tribute to Carers UK, which does a wonderful job as the voice for carers in ensuring that all of us and people throughout the country are aware of carers, their needs and the role that they play.

It is interesting that this year's carers week, under the heading of "Carers: the UK's secret service", focused on the health of carers. It is also interesting that we are having a health debate about carers; I was speaking in a work and pensions debate on carers only a few weeks ago. The cross-departmental responsibilities involved create challenges, and we do not always get joined-up thinking. Some of the figures from the health perspective of caring are particularly interesting. Figures from a Carers UK survey show that more than half of all carers have suffered from a stress-related illness, that more than half have suffered from a physical illness as a result of caring and that 95 per cent. disguise illness because they want to continue with their caring responsibilities. Those are stark figures. It is therefore right that we should concentrate on the health aspects of caring, as well as on the financial implications.

I would like to ask the Minister some questions about the £150 million that has been earmarked for primary care trusts to spend on respite for carers. First, can he supply us with a breakdown of how much of that money has gone to each primary care trust? How has the Department made PCTs aware of their responsibilities and of what the money is intended for? Most importantly, however—this is what carers want to know—how many carers have benefited from that money? Bluntly, how many carers have received a break? The information that I have received from Carers UK suggests that possibly not many have, which I am afraid means that the money is not getting through. I would ask the Minister to consider that point carefully and give a response.

A year on from the launch of the carers strategy—an initiative that was welcomed—the Minister has to say how much has changed for carers. Clearly some initiatives are happening, including some that should already have been happening. However, he must accept that if one speaks to carers, as I know many hon. Members have, one will hear from them that very little has changed, and that is not enough. Crucially, the fundamentals have not changed. The fundamentals relate to how we regard carers in this country. The simple reality is that, through the historic development of the carer's allowance, we have asked, "What benefits should we

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give carers?" However, we should turn that question on its head. We should instead ask, "How as a society can we adequately recognise carers and what they do, and recompense them for the contribution that they make to society?"

We have heard the figure of £87 billion that is saved for the national health service by the contribution of our 6 million carers. However, I wonder what the cost to the NHS would be of not properly supporting carers. The figures for how many carers are suffering from illnesses as a direct result of their caring responsibilities suggest that the cost would be huge. That is something that we must look into. Many carers are older people who care for loved ones, and we know that their numbers will increase simply because of demographics.

We have also heard about younger carers, who are covered in the report by the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, of which I am a member. As has been acknowledged, young people who are carers cannot do the things that other young people do, such as sport. Therefore, they cannot keep themselves as healthy as other young people if they are not given proper respite. There is also an impact on their earning potential, their chances of going to university and the other things that come under the work and pensions banner.

However, the crux of the matter, as several hon. Members have said, is that we simply do not have a system that adequately reflects the contribution made by carers. The level of the carer's allowance remains a source of shame and embarrassment to this country. I echo the calls made by the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow)—we need a timetable. This Government are running out of time; they have a matter of months. Surely the Minister, who I know cares deeply about the issue, wants to bring forward a proper timetable for the reform of those benefits.

Mr. Burstow: My hon. Friend is rightly pressing the Minister to provide a timetable for the reform of the allowance, but does he agree that we also need a timetable for the publication of the Green Paper?

Greg Mulholland: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which I should like to use to ask the Minister to indicate the extent to which carers' needs will be considered in the Green Paper, because that is so crucial to the wider issue.

We must have a timetable, but I reiterate what I said in the debate a few weeks ago. We cannot accept the reform of benefits for carers under the umbrella of benefit simplification. That will mean waiting too long. Carers cannot wait for a wider review of the benefits system. That work will be important, but carers need to be considered separately and sooner, because as the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright) said, the cost implications of not doing anything are huge.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to point out the huge contribution that carers make. However, may I leave the Minister with this thought: can he give us an indication of when, before this Government leave office, he will put that timetable in place?

1.38 pm

Angela Watkinson (Upminster) (Con): This important debate is taking place in carers week. Indeed, I shall be attending carers day in my constituency tomorrow, as I am sure many colleagues will be in theirs too. It is right that Parliament should draw full attention to the important contribution that carers make to the quality of the lives of their family members with a chronic illness or disability.

Carers make an impressive collective saving of £87 billion a year to the public purse. Indeed, it is doubtful whether our public services would have the capacity to intervene for the number of people being cared for if their families were no longer able to cope. An estimated 6 million people are caring currently, and we must not take them for granted. It is important that we acknowledge that that huge saving to the taxpayer, which is higher than the total NHS budget in 2006-07, often comes at great cost to individual carers, in terms of limited access to education and training opportunities, availability for work, which seriously limits their earning potential, and social contact outside the home.

All too often, carers experience impaired health, which results from the daily demands that caring places on them. Carers are not noted for complaining about their lot in life. Old and young carers alike put the needs of their loved ones before themselves, and they do it cheerfully, but on a very tight budget. I welcome the Minister's comments about a benefit review, which I hope will happen soon.

The situation for carers is quite complex, because they are allowed to earn only £95 a week if they wish to have access to the carer's allowance. They are also limited in their ability to make themselves available for employment, given the logistics of their daily lives. The number of hours that they can leave home every day may be limited, and they need to balance that responsibility with the needs of the person for whom they are caring. So we are not only talking about a financial equation; there are other practical problems relating to the earning capacity of carers.

I welcome the Minister's comment about family pathfinders. That was news to me, and I was pleased to hear it. I want to say a little about young carers. I have been surprised to find out how many young people are caring for a parent who is disabled or who has a chronic illness. The London borough of Havering, of which Upminster forms a part, presents young citizens awards every year for a range of special achievements including sport, education and volunteering. Young carers are always represented.

The routines and daily lives of young carers are very different from those of their peers. Many children need to be chased in the morning to get dressed, eat their breakfast and remember their PE kit and their homework, but these children do all that for themselves as well as caring for their parent. They help to wash and dress them, then perhaps write a shopping list for the food for family meals that they need to collect on the way home from school. Lunch time for those young carers is not taken up by clubs or sports or playing with their friends. It is an opportunity to go home and check on their mother. After school, they collect the shopping, go home and help to prepare the evening meal. These responsibilities, although carried out willingly and cheerfully, can be emotionally and physically exhausting for a child.

Schools are as supportive as possible of pupils in those circumstances, but we must find ways to ensure that those children do not fall below their educational potential. There is a direct link here to the next debate, as young carers may self-exclude from entry into the professions, not from a lack of ability but from a lack of personal aspiration and ambition and from a sense of duty to caring. There is a challenge here for schools and social services to work together to prevent this from happening, particularly in families with no history of further or higher education.

I am particularly involved with autism in my constituency, and the spotlight has been on autism recently. Those of us who took part in the "walk in our shoes" day had the opportunity to see at first hand how autism in one child affects the life of the entire family. The daily routine is arranged around the needs of the autistic child, and I was surprised to learn of the associated additional costs involved, including the frequent replacement of damaged items in the home and unusually large quantities of laundry, for example.

Parents of children on the low-performing end of the autistic disorder spectrum have a continuing long-term caring role. Their children are unable to reach the usual periodic milestones in development that gradually reduce the parental supervision and caring role. Special schools play a hugely supportive role, providing not only education for their pupils but a period of respite during the day, which is often the only opportunity for parents to sleep. Some children with autism are very bad sleepers; I have heard parents say that their child can go without sleep for a week. If there are other children in such a family, the mother often stays awake all night trying to keep the autistic child quiet and occupied so that the rest of the family are not disturbed. The children might have to go to school in the morning; the father might have to go to work.

I pay tribute to the three superb special schools in my constituency—Dycorts, Ravensbourne and Corbets Tey—for the quality of the education that they provide and for the endless patience and respect that they show to their pupils in teasing out every last ounce of potential for development. The end of statutory education is often dreaded by parents, as the days are long and difficult to fill. The wonderful ROSE—realistic opportunities for supported employment—project at Havering college of further and higher education is a boon to students with learning difficulties and their parent carers. The supported employment project started in a very modest way, with a small number of job tutors and students, but it has grown more than anyone dared to hope. It has gone from strength to strength.

Instead of a life of boredom at home on benefits, the young people with learning difficulties—many of them are young people with autism—are able to have paid employment with support that is gradually withdrawn until they are able to travel and spend their working day independently. They have proved themselves to be reliable, cheerful and anxious to please their employers. Moreover, their parents benefit from the daily respite. When the ROSE project started, its organisers went out to local employers in my constituency to try to persuade them to provide placements for students with learning difficulties. Over time, the students have been so successful that the employers approach the project to ask whether it has students available.

People with Down's syndrome now have a good life expectancy because of improved health care, but independent living is not always possible for them, and the caring role of parents can often extend into the parents' old age. Caring parents have real worries about their physical ability to continue to care and, worse, about the future of their children when they are gone. How will they adapt to changed living circumstances and cope with bereavement?

Alzheimer's sufferers present particular problems when the condition comes on late in life, as it often does. Their carers are usually their spouses, who are themselves elderly and may not be in the best of health and fitness. There is added stress when the sufferer no longer recognises the carer. Even though they might have spent decades living together in a loving relationship, they often end their days in very different, stressful circumstances.

Older people are probably the least likely to seek help, particularly the very elderly people who do not like to make a fuss. They do not like to bother the doctor as they feel they must be terribly busy looking after other people. This means that situations often reach crisis point before help is sought. That can result in the person with Alzheimer's being taken into professional care and the very elderly spouse making daily visits but not being recognised. That is a very sad situation.

I have in my constituency the wonderful Havering Association of Disabilities, which is an umbrella organisation for carers and people with a wide range of disabilities, run by the inspirational Mary Capon. It provides an effective support network, including a befriending service that is invaluable for disabled people living on their own. The befrienders form a real relationship with people. They visit them at home and also take them out, which often provides the only opportunity that those people have to leave the house.

The organisation also provides a good range of social activities, and opportunities for training in information technology and in preparing a CV, in preparation for seeking employment. Without even asking Mary Capon, I say to the Minister that I know that she would love the Havering Association of Disabilities to be involved with the family pathfinders project, whatever form it takes.

I know that all hon. Members are very much aware of the huge contribution made by carers in enabling their loved ones to remain in their own homes in familiar surroundings, and in reducing the size of the health and social services budgets by putting their own needs in second place. But we always need to ensure that carers' continuing efforts are appreciated. We all know individual carers and discuss their circumstances with them regularly, but the acknowledgement and appreciation need to range wider, so that no carer feels isolated or overlooked, and so that all possible practical and financial help is made available to improve the quality of carers' lives.

1.49 pm

Jeremy Wright (Rugby and Kenilworth) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson) and I substantially agree with many of her points. Indeed, I agree with a great deal of what all contributors to the debate have said—including the Minister, who opened it and whom I am delighted to see still in his place. He knows better than

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most that this policy area requires consistency of approach, which is difficult to achieve when we have a different Minister every few months. It is a pleasure to see him still in his post.

I shall make just a few points in order to allow the Minister time to respond to the debate. My first is about the number of carers, although I am in agreement with my hon. Friend that, in a sense, it does not much matter whether there are 5 million or 6 million. My point is that the argument should be, at least in part, about how many of those who are carers identify themselves as such. Many do not: they see themselves as doing right by their families, looking after family members in the way they believe is incumbent on them to do—without wishing, as she said, to make a fuss or to draw attention to what they do, and without seeking recognition or reward for it.

Carers are often very modest people, with every reason not to be so. The recognition that we rightly give to them—and it should not be just annually in debates such as this; I agree with those who say that we should recognise them more frequently, more regularly and more consistently—comes not because they ask for it, but because they richly deserve it. We need to persuade those carers to identify themselves as such before we can offer them the sort of assistance the Minister set out and to which others have referred. The offers of help and support, the information exercises and so forth are linked with the opportunity that we should take to recognise carers and encourage those who do not yet recognise themselves as such to do so in order to access all those streams of support.

Angela Watkinson: I agree that carers do not often fit readily into a definable box. The right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) may recall that I visited her in her previous ministerial role. I came to see her with a young lady from my constituency who was trying to balance work and benefits with her mother, who did not regard herself as a carer because the daughter was ostensibly living independently. However, the mother spent most of her life dashing back and forth from her own home to her daughter's home to give her the support that she could not manage without.

Jeremy Wright: I entirely agree, and I think that the lady my hon. Friend describes is one of those whom we should try harder to reach and offer the sort of support that we all want carers to receive.

Mr. Burstow: According to the last census, there were about 19,000 carers in my constituency, but we have identified only about 4,000 or 5,000 in the borough. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one group of professionals most likely to come across carers—either because of a carer's ill health or the ill health of the person for whom they are caring—is general practitioners? GPs need to get training in order better to identify carers and then act as the facilitators in passing the information on to others.

Jeremy Wright: I entirely agree; the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is why, as I said, I was encouraged by what the Minister told us about opportunities to train those who are professionals to understand how to help those who are not professionals but who are still making a substantial contribution to the care of people we are most concerned to look after.

It seems to me that this is more than a matter of gratitude or just saying thank you to carers—however much we rightly do so in the debate—because we need to offer them real and practical support. As the Minister rightly said, we must try to ensure that carers have the maximum opportunity to combine their caring responsibilities not only with a fulfilling social life but, just as importantly, with a fulfilling career. That should enable them to get back into work, succeed on their own terms and still maintain their caring responsibilities. Once again, it is important for carers to identify themselves to receive the recognition they deserve; in circumstances of better and greater recognition, it should be easier for them to go to their employers and ask for the flexible working they need. It should be easier for that to happen if employers automatically understand what carers do and how important it is for them to continue with it.

It is also important to ensure that health and social services professionals—the people mentioned by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow)—can recognise the importance of a carer's responsibilities and a carer's understanding of the individual for whom care is being provided. Too many carers—we all talk to them—are frustrated because they are treated as people who do not understand what is going on, when in fact the opposite is the case and the carer is the one who spends the most time with the person for whom care is being provided. He or she knows that person best, and their opinion of that person—what they need and what they will best respond to—should be fully taken into account.

I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) that it is important to reconcile that viewpoint with the occasional desire of the person being cared for to take a different view from that of their carer on any subject. In the majority of cases, however, what the person cared for will want is for their carer's view to be taken fully into account. Rarely is it in fact taken into account as fully as we would wish by the professionals involved in their care.

I wish to refer to two specific groups. The first was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster and, indeed, by the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland), who both rightly highlighted the interests of young carers. It is right to pay particular attention to their needs, but equally we should not forget those at the other end of the age range. Older carers have particular needs and particular requirements. They are the ones whose health suffers disproportionately as a result of their caring responsibilities. We know that about a quarter of the 5 million or 6 million carers are of retirement age. That is a very significant number of people, and I believe that there are about 8,000 carers over the age of 90! How those people manage, I simply do not know, but we must be aware of their particular needs and requirements when we consider how best to help carers.

The second group is, as my hon. Friend said, an overlapping group—those who care for people who have dementia. The Minister would be disappointed if I failed to mention dementia at some point in my remarks. It is important to recognise the particular requirements on those who care not just for people with dementia but

for all who have a mental illness or disability as opposed to a physical one. I am not saying for a moment that it is easier to care for someone with a physical disability, but it is different, and there are different requirements on carers looking after someone with a mental difficulty.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, one of the main differences is that the carer starts to lose something of the person they knew as the illness or condition progresses. More often than not, the person being cared for requires more and more from the carer, just as the carer is losing more and more of the one for whom they are caring. That is an extremely distressing situation to be in for anyone with a caring responsibility. We need to take account not just of the physical health needs, but of the mental health needs of those who are carers, and ensure that the risks they run—in exposure to depression and other conditions—are adequately catered for.

I have a couple of final points about the specific and practical action that we can take. The first, which the Minister mentioned, is respite care. It is right to provide for the availability of such care. No one can do a caring job 24 hours a day, seven days a week—they simply could not cope; people need a break sometimes. A break will help them to do a better job for the rest of the time; that is well understood by everyone. It is also worth acknowledging that simple provision of respite care will not do the job, because we also need to provide for quality respite care. If we do not, it will not be a real break at all. We have all spoken to carers who tell us, "I put the person I care for into full-time care. I had a week's holiday, but it was the worst week in my life, because I spent the entire time worrying about whether my loved one was being properly looked after." That is not respite care. We need to ensure that the respite care we provide is of sufficient quality to provide that reassurance, and that information about its quality is provided to carers so that they enjoy the break that we can offer them.

My last point is about simplicity. When it comes to the benefit system, we will all have difficult decisions to make about how much can be afforded, but it is beyond question that when people look at a website or call a phone line to understand what is available, the information given must be easily digestible. Whether the advice is there or not, the actual provision of benefits needs to be simpler. That is why we have to talk about the cliff edge or the distinction between retirement and non-retirement so that there is some continuity and simplicity in the benefits that those who provide care can receive.

We shall never be able to make the lives of those who care easy—that is beyond all of us—but we do have a responsibility to make those lives slightly less difficult, and I think that both this and the next Government should focus their attention on that.

2 pm

Phil Hope: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall respond to the debate.

I thank all hon. Members for their valuable contributions. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) and the hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth (Jeremy Wright) for their clear and moving speeches. I am pleased that carers week gave us the opportunity to engage in this debate, and also to give other hon. Members and organisations an opportunity to engage in debates throughout the country. I thank all the organisations that work to support and represent carers, not just national organisations, but the organisations in Members' constituencies of which we have heard today, which do such fantastic work all over the country.

The hon. Member for Upminster (Angela Watkinson) reminded us of the role played not just by carers but by volunteers and befrienders. The fact that 20 million people offer their services voluntarily to the community is, along with the number of carers, a sign that we have a strong society with its values in the right place.

Let me try to clarify the question of numbers. I understand that the 5 million figure given yesterday relates to the number of carers in England, while the 6 million figure given by Carers UK relates to the whole United Kingdom. However, as we were told by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), the figures may be even higher, because not all carers identify themselves as such.

Hon. Members pointed out that GPs provide an important gateway to the necessary resources, and drew attention to the need for support for both young and older carers. They also mentioned dementia. The hon. Member for Rugby and Kenilworth, who chairs the all-party group on dementia, spoke of the importance of responding to the individual needs of different people in different ways and tailoring support. Caring can sometimes be very distressing and demanding.

Let me say a few things that I did not have an opportunity to say in my opening speech. Hon. Members referred to carers who want both to care and to go on working. We want to help them to do that. Jobcentre Plus is recruiting specialist care partnership managers, who will be responsible for improving information on carers support for both staff and customers. We want to try to remove some of the barriers faced by carers who wish to return to paid employment. We want to stand up and represent their employment interests in a variety of partnerships. The aim of Employers for Carers, an organisation launched earlier this year, is to identify and promote the business benefits of supporting carers at work. Many employed people also have caring responsibilities, and Employers for Carers offers practical support for the development and benchmarking of good practice.

I do not have time to respond to all the points that have been raised, but I will say to the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), who listed a number of demands and complaints, that I did not hear from him a single commitment or pledge of support for any particular policy. I feel that he struck a discordant note in choosing to create a party-political divide by calling for an election. That was silly. He made a sad, slightly whingeing and unhelpful contribution to an important debate which should have united the House. Similarly, the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West (Greg Mulholland) asked questions but offered no information about the Liberal Democrats' proposals—

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 24A).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry that the Minister has had to suffer a double whammy, but we must now proceed to the next debate.

Social Mobility and the Professions

[Relevant document: The uncorrected transcript of oral evidence taken before the Children, Schools and Families Committee on 8 June 2009, on Social Mobility, HC 624-i.]

2.4 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of social mobility and fair access to the professions.

I am pleased that my first Cabinet Office debate concerns such an important issue—one of the most important that must be dealt with by society as a whole, and a subject on which I feel particularly strongly.

I want to say something about the work of the panel on fair access to the professions. I pay tribute to the panel and its chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn). Access to the professions and social mobility are important to society and to hon. Members in all parts of the House. Today's debate will be enhanced by the wealth of expertise represented on the panel, which, as a cross-party, independent body, has scrutinised both Government and society as a whole. Having read its reports, I thank the panel for the depth of the work that it has undertaken, and look forward to seeing the conclusions and recommendations that it will make to the Prime Minister.

The Government believe that every member of society should have the opportunity to get on with life. That ethos is at the heart of what government is about. We are committed to ensuring that everyone can achieve their potential, not just now but in the decades to come—not just for their own benefit, important though that is, but for the benefit of society and the economy. We need to be able to draw on the widest possible pool of talent, and ensure that the best people enter the professions.

The panel's reports identify the importance of the professions to the economic and social success of the country, and reflect on the number of new people who are required in an evolving global economy—an economy which will become very different in the future. They also draw attention to the need for fairer access in particular spheres. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington will say more about that, but what is crucial is the ability to choose from the widest possible pool of talent in order to increase economic efficiency and production. That will not only help individuals to succeed, but contribute to social cohesion and inclusion. Social mobility has a direct impact on our economic future.

It may seem difficult to imagine this now, but the world's economy is set to double in the next decade as India and China renew their economic growth. One billion skilled jobs are being created, and here in the United Kingdom we shall need to find an extra 6.8 million or so new entrants to the professions. We need to be ready to capture those jobs in the future, and ensure that everyone can enjoy new opportunities as they arrive. That must be a priority for the Government.

Access to the professions and to senior jobs must clearly be based on talent and the ability to do the job. Geography, finance and family background cannot be the deciding factors. Although that ambition is not contentious, many communities, and even graduates of many universities, are denied access to many professional and senior jobs. Of course no one wants people who cannot do the job; what we want are the best people in the job, regardless of their background. All too often, barriers exist to prevent that. We are committed to continuing the progress that has already been made, and destroying every obstacle in order to ensure fair access to the professions for all.

I think it fair to say that we have made progress towards achieving our objectives, but to ensure fair access we need to help individuals at different stages of their lives. Children need support from their early years if they are to secure the best start in life and develop their abilities. Young people, whatever their backgrounds and aspirations, need support as they make the transition from school to further education, training and higher education. Adults also need help to develop and adapt their skills in an increasingly changing labour market. The provision of excellent, personalised public services can provide the right balance of support and incentives, and we are continuing to build on what we have already achieved in that regard.

We do not consider it right to cut the investment that is necessary to build secure foundations for tomorrow, especially during a recession. I know that some believe that a recession is the best time at which to cut back, but it really is not. We must invest during a recession in order to take advantage of the upturn.

Even the youngest people need support if the professions are to benefit from that wider pool of talent in the future, and we have more than doubled the number of child care places to 1.5 million in just over 10 years. All three-year-olds and four-year-olds are now entitled to free part-time early education places if that is what their parents want, and we have introduced more than 3,000 Sure Start children's centres. We have brought families out of poverty through tax credits, the national minimum wage and child trust funds, which is making a real difference to their lives. I am sure that all Members of Parliament have been told about that in their constituencies.

In the Budget, the Chancellor also announced that the child element of the tax credit would increase by an additional £20 a year above indexation from April 2010. In schools we have doubled funding per pupil in real terms, which has raised overall performance. We owe a tribute to teachers and classroom assistants, who have played a massive part in changing education and improving the quality of education that young people receive in our schools. It is no coincidence that total funding per pupil in the past 12 years has almost doubled to £2,880. In the pre-Budget report we announced £14.5 billion of additional spending on education for 2010-11. That investment has made a difference. There are now fewer schools in special measures—the number has nearly halved in just over 10 years—and those that are in special measures get out of them much more quickly because of the support that is there for them. The investment in education means that there are 41,000 more teachers, 210,000 more support staff and over 120,000 more teaching assistants than there were 12 years ago.

The investment also means that now more than 64 per cent. of pupils attain at least five GCSEs from A* to C, including English and Maths. That has gone up from 45 per cent.—less than half—12 years ago. The investment in staff, equipment, buildings and child care has delivered real improvements in education. To help those who are

perhaps most at risk from not fulfilling their potential in school, we have introduced the educational maintenance allowance. Half a million young people have been helped every year with £10, £20 or £30 a week.

In the 2009 Budget, the Chancellor also announced a guaranteed job, training or work placement for all 18 to 24-year-olds who reach 12 months' unemployment. We have also prioritised giving second chances to those adults who did not achieve their potential in education the first time around. Since 2001, over 2.5 million people have improved their basic skills and we have now put in place a legal right for adults to get free training up to level 2—GCSE, A-level or equivalent—to help increase their employability. We have revived apprenticeships as a viable and mainstream option for young people. This year there will be an extra 35,000 apprenticeships and we have seen a huge increase in the number of young people completing their apprenticeships.

One problem is that all too often in the professions there are barriers preventing those in junior roles from progressing to professional and better paid jobs. There was a time when older journalists could say that they had gone from making the tea on their local paper to becoming a senior journalist on a national newspaper. We do not see that so often these days. Another route is an unpaid internship through family connections in London, which is becoming an increasingly normal way to enter national journalism. It can still be difficult for talented, able and ambitious apprentices to work their way up to the highest levels. We have listened to the views on this and, following consultation, the UCAS points system will be applied to apprenticeships.

I wish to draw the House's attention to the "New Opportunities" White Paper, which sets out ambitious plans for everyone in Britain to make the most of their potential, to increase aspiration and, having done so, to turn that into success. The commitments in the White Paper will have a direct impact on the issues under discussion today. We are on track to provide access to high-quality early learning and child care for two-year-olds by September.

Already 145 schools are taking part in the scheme to get the most effective teachers into the most challenging schools. Often, one of the problems for the most challenging schools is a high turnover of teachers. Effective teachers are joining such schools from September, and they will get a new £10,000 incentive if they guarantee to stay in the school for three years, thus ensuring continuity of teaching for their pupils. These new skills and that continuity will help to continue the improvements that we are seeing in the most challenging schools, often in the most challenging communities.

The National Apprenticeship Service was launched in April with the aim of creating 35,000 new apprenticeship places across the public and private sectors. That is a challenge. We have a Cabinet-level steering group and the continued development of delivery plans is in the early stages, but good progress is being made and I urge as many private and public organisations as possible to take on apprentices to make this a success.

We are trebling the number of career development loans available for people who want to undertake training. It will help to develop their skills and to realise their full potential. Over the next two years, 45,000 new and rebranded professional and career development loans will be made available, up from the 15,000 available in this financial year. They will be made more attractive by reducing the headline interest rates, allowing people to apply for loans of up to £10,000 to study at colleges, universities and with private training providers—an increase on the current limit of £8,000.

John Bercow (Buckingham) (Con): I am listening with respect to the Minister. The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), will know that a particular hobby horse of mine is clause 84 of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, which concerns election for apprenticeship schemes. Will the Minister take on board the concern that if there is a prescriptive requirement that somebody should have level 2 or level 3 qualifications, that can discriminate against young people with special educational needs—perhaps on the autistic spectrum—who do not have such qualifications but who in every other way would be extremely well suited to the pursuit of an apprenticeship scheme?

Angela E. Smith: I entirely agree; the hon. Gentleman will know that the matter was raised several times in Committee. The Government are looking at it, because we do not want people with special educational needs to be excluded from apprenticeships. I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Minister has taken his comments on board. That point also relates to the charity v, which is looking at full-time volunteering opportunities for young people who are not in education or employment. We want that to be extended as far as possible from April this year.

Having read the two reports from the panel, I am eager to see the recommendations to be given to the Prime Minister. We believe that everyone with ability from across society should have an opportunity to get the most senior jobs in society. That is why the Government invited my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington, senior professionals and experts to establish the panel on fair access to the professions, which is entirely independent of Government.

The panel's remit was to look at barriers to fair access and senior jobs and at what more could be done by the professions with support from the Government to improve fair access for all. Fair access to the professions is crucial for individuals. It is important for their communities and for society, but it is also crucial to the economy as a whole. We must have the widest possible pool of talent from which to choose, as that increases economic efficiency and productivity. It is not just individuals who succeed if we give everyone a fair chance; it can also contribute to social cohesion and social inclusion. Social mobility has a direct impact on our economic future.

The panel is developing its recommendations, which will be published over the summer, although it has shown so far that many of the top professions are not representative of society. There is a much higher representation of independent school-educated professionals, especially doctors and lawyers, who come from well-off families.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): The Minister referred to the report being published in the summer. That has been the official position for some time. Can she give any more detail as to when we might expect it? Will there be a statement to the Commons?

Angela E. Smith: That is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington. It is not my report or my panel. I wish I could assist the hon. Gentleman. It would not be for the Government to tell my right hon. Friend what to do and when to present his report.

Mr. Alan Milburn (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful not to be told what to do by my hon. Friend. If it helps the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) and the House, I can say that the intention is to publish our report in mid-July. It is for the Government to decide whether they want the House to consider it. As it is an independent report from a ferociously independent panel, representing all parties and none, I cannot speak on behalf of the Government on that issue. But we will publish in mid-July—I before the House rises, I hope.

Angela E. Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I think that "summer" was a fair representation, although we are not always sure that July is summer. Some professions have perversely become less, not more, socially representative over time, especially accountancy and journalism. The panel has so far identified five underlying barriers to improving access to the professions and the House would be pleased to hear the views of Members on these issues.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I appreciate that the hon. Lady has just started that section of her speech, but will she give at least some credit to the professions—particularly the Law Society and the Bar Council I might add, as I was formerly a lawyer—for the efforts that they have made to increase social mobility and ensure that there is, as far as possible, broader access to them? It should not be felt that the professions are unaware that these issues are at stake; indeed, they have made some significant steps in recent years. They might have more to do, but they are very much on board.

Angela E. Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Many professions recognise that if they are to attract the brightest, best and most able, they will need to have a much fairer system of progression. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Bar Council, and there is Julia Neuberger's report on that issue. Many professions have taken good steps forward, but they acknowledge that they have more to do in facing the challenge ahead of us. Progress has been made, but I would not imagine that any Member thinks that we have gone as far as we should. I acknowledge the progress that has been made, but we want there to be more, and we await the panel's recommendations on the best ways to achieve that.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I want to ask the hon. Lady a question, and to do so without prejudice. To what extent has graduate entry changed the opportunities for people to rise through professions? It was once entirely possible for someone to start as a tea boy in a professional organisation and to rise to close to the top of it. I know of cases when precisely that occurred in both journalism and accountancy.

Angela E. Smith: The panel will be looking at, and making recommendations on, precisely those issues. The extent of such opportunities varies from profession to profession. Graduate entry has opened up access in some professions, but, perversely, it has had the oppos effect in others. That is why the panel has been asked make independent recommendations on all these issu we want fair access to the professions.

The panel's initial report highlights the aspirations young people as a significant barrier. Only one in f young people from average backgrounds and only o in eight from poorer backgrounds currently aspire to a professional—in this context, that term covers a wi range of professions. However, the proportion for you people whose parents are already in one of the professio is two in five. I do not believe that where we live, h much our parents earn and what our parents do ha any impact at all on ability, but they clearly impact young people's aspirations.

Another important issue is career support for you people. The panel's research shows that soft skills becoming increasingly valued by employers, but not young people have the opportunity to develop the Another barrier is to do with internships and wo experience. They have become an important route in the top jobs. More than nine in 10 young people ha been interns. That helps to raise their aspirations a improve their CVs, and four out of five employ recruit former interns. A disproportionate number internships are in London and the south-east, and evidence shows that more internships are sourced throu families and friends than through advertised schem Therefore, where a young person lives and what univers they attend can also be a barrier to their moving in the professions.

Another issue is recruitment and selection. Seven o of 10 of the top graduate employers target just 20 167 universities. Therefore, as I have said before, wh university someone attends can have an impact on th progression.

There is also an issue to do with flexible routes entry to the professions. There has been a long-te decline in the non-graduate routes. Today, only 27 *The Times* top 100 employers accept alternative en routes such as non-graduate entry. There are go examples of professions opening their doors to peo entering from different routes, such as the fast-tra teaching qualification, which can be undertaken in j six months. There is clearly more to do, however.

It will take a few years before we have a clea picture of access to professions for all those who ha come through the education system in the past deca but to date the panel's evidence shows a narrowi attainment gap between kids from poorer families a those from better off families. We believe that that v lead to increased social mobility in the years ahead.

The issue of aspiration is at the heart of this deba We need to ensure that young people aim higher a fulfil their aspirations. Fair access to the profession not just good for those individuals who succeed; it good for their communities and for society. It is also exaggeration to say that it is essential for the econor and social future of this country.

Any successful economic strategy that can take advant of the global economy of the future must be built the foundation of a highly skilled work force. We currently in very difficult economic times, but this is the time to cut back. We need to invest, as it is cruc that we are ready for the economic upturn when

comes and as it happens. It is estimated that the global economy will need 1 billion extra skilled jobs in the next 20 years, and the figure for the United Kingdom is probably about 6.8 million to 7 million.

To reap the benefits, we will need action and investment at every stage of a child's life. I know that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) does not entirely accept that and has concerns about early-years investment and Sure Start. The evidence shows, however, that we have to invest in those early years; otherwise, we will not reap the benefits as those children pass through the education system.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) may have let the cat out of the bag this week when he talked about proposals for 10 per cent. funding cuts across the board—apart from in one or two areas. If the Opposition's proposals are to cut post-16 Train to Gain, that will reduce social mobility, increase social inequalities and fail this country's economy. The progress being made by the Government will lead to everyone being able to fulfil their potential. If one person does not fulfil their potential and aspirations, or fails to have them in the first place, that is a waste for them as an individual, for the community, for society as a whole, and, crucially, for the economy and future of this country. We are committed to stopping the squandering of those skills, and to ensuring that the brightest and the best from every background, family income level and part of the country will have the chance to fulfil their potential.

Mr. Mark Field: Does the hon. Lady not feel that the emphasis—or, it might be argued, over-emphasis—on aspirations and access to the professions can often obscure a real concern? She is right that there will be a need for 1 billion more skilled people in the global economy in the decades ahead. The real issue, therefore, is that there needs to be more investment in further education and lifelong learning, not simply in access to the professions, which will always be elitist in the respect that only about 15 or 20 per cent. of people will be able to aspire to join them. We should focus on the jobs that will be required in future through better further education and a commitment to lifelong learning.

Angela E. Smith: I am puzzled by the hon. Gentleman's point, although I accept that he means it well, in that the two things seem complementary. The argument we are putting forward today—this is why we are so keen to see the panel's recommendations—is that through every life cycle of someone's education and skills training, the support and training needs to be in place. Having support and fairer access to professions is crucial, but part and parcel of that is improving access to further and higher education. The two are complementary; they are not exclusive or separate in any way.

In conclusion, I pay tribute again to the work undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington and his panel. He has taken on a huge task, because this issue affects the future not only of individuals but of the whole economy of this country. He will want to take on board the views of this House, and we are eager to see his recommendations, so that they can be taken on board in order to make the difference that society and this country needs.

2.30 pm

Mr. David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I welcome both the Minister to her new responsibilities, which include this important subject of social mobility, and this debate. I do not know whether she planned to have a debate on this subject within two days of becoming the Minister responsible for it, but it is welcome that she is at the Dispatch Box to speak on it. The right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) is also in the Chamber, and he is leading the independent review. The work that has been produced, both originally by the Cabinet Office's strategy unit—that was on social mobility as a whole—and more recently by the panel on fair access to the professions, is excellent. The amount of empirical evidence assembled in those reports is fantastic, and I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is the right man to push forward this agenda. We read in the papers that he got his party's Chief Whip to apologise for having suggested that he was a rebel plotting the downfall of the Prime Minister last week; we note that nobody else has had such a statement from the Chief Whip. It is good to see the right hon. Gentleman in the Chamber to debate this important subject.

Our starting point is the statistics that have led to an extraordinarily lively academic debate about the decline in social mobility between children born in 1958 and those born in 1970. Although the evidence since 1970 is debated, it seems clear to me that, despite one or two claims to the contrary, social mobility has been flatlining since 1970. The summary of the November 2008 document got it about right when it stated:

"Broadly, social mobility is no greater or less since 1970".

Something I welcomed in the Minister's statement was that she did not try to argue that social mobility was improving again; it might be, but we do not have the evidence for that. One of the leading experts, Paul Gregg, who did work on children who were born in 1990 and took their GCSEs 15 years later, said that there was not enough evidence to claim with any confidence that there had been an improvement. Although we hope things are getting better, we do not have the evidence to say that at the moment.

The panel's reports are fascinating. The Minister rather dangerously strayed into the territory of access to different professions. As I do not believe that there are any journalists sitting up there in the Press Gallery, let us be clear about what the figures show. The table on page 2, which shows the backgrounds of professionals born in 1958 compared with those of professionals born in 1970—again, those two longitudinal studies are used—is about the most fascinating one in the report. The table measures how much more affluent their families were in comparison with the average family income.

In some professions—teaching, for example—there has been, if anything, a tiny improvement. For those joining other professions, the family backgrounds of those born in 1970 were much more relatively affluent than the backgrounds of those born in 1958. The biggest single change was found to have taken place in journalism: journalists born in 1958 were seen to have come from backgrounds where the family income was roughly the same as the average, whereas for those born in 1970 a massive gap had opened up. I am looking forward to the Minister coming to the Chamber when we have the panel's report in mid-July and telling us what she is

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going to do about access to journalism. As she takes on the journalists' profession, we will be watching sympathetically from a distance.

I was also struck by the material on page 45, which again shows the rise of requirements for graduate entry—another powerful piece of evidence from this very useful report. We look forward to the final report that the Minister will receive from the right hon. Member for Darlington.

We have done some research of our own on social mobility, including an analysis of evidence from the Office for National Statistics about the backgrounds of people who go to university. We did a micro-analysis, based on the neighbourhoods that those people came from, and we concluded that the figures convey a stark message. Despite hundreds of millions of pounds being spent on widening participation, the figures still show that in the richest, most affluent areas of the country six in 10 young people go to university, but in the poorest, most deprived neighbourhoods three in 10 go to university. So there are still enormous gaps in the opportunities for young people to go to university, and it is hard to improve social mobility with that bottleneck in the access to university.

We are also concerned about the prospects for the poorest young people. They have an increased risk of being not in education, employment or training—NEET. We are, sadly, in tough economic times with high unemployment, and it is worth remembering the evidence that a period of unemployment, especially when very young, can scar someone for life. People's lifetime earning prospects are affected, and it seems to affect the kind of jobs they have 20 years later.

Mr. Mark Field: It is also perhaps worth stressing that that applies not only to young people leaving school, but to those leaving university. Those who graduated during the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s have found their opportunities severely limited. Sadly, the same may apply to last year's graduates and this year's graduates—although we hope not for too much further forward than that. A recession is a very limiting experience, whenever one leaves full-time education.

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is right, and that is why we propose, as a temporary measure, that extra postgraduate taught masterships should be made available for people leaving university this year who are finding it difficult to get a job.

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): The Government are committed to growth in postgraduate education along the lines that the hon. Gentleman suggests. I am sure that he will agree that although graduates face a tough autumn, in the medium to long term those in the employment market arrive in the end where they intended to be.

Mr. Willetts: Well, we hope so. We will have an unusual development this summer, which will see the toughest recruitment round for graduates since the big expansion of universities. We have had a steadily improving labour market overall for the past 15 years, and I hope that what the Minister says is correct and the evidence on the blighting of life chances by periods of unemployment does not apply to graduates. We will have to wait and see.

Young people will be the worst victims of the recession because they will find it hard to get jobs when they leave university, and youth unemployment is rising. But even during the boom years in the first part of this decade and while in other advanced economies youth unemployment was falling and the proportion of young people who were NEET was falling, Britain was already heading in the wrong direction. For example, among 16 to 24-year-olds unemployment rose in the UK between 1997 and 2007 from 13.4 per cent. to 14.4 per cent. while across the OECD it fell from 15.7 per cent. to 13.4 per cent. Our NEET rate for the same age group rose from 11.6 per cent. in 2000 to 13 per cent. in 2005 at the same time as the OECD average was falling. I make that point because that tells me that some feature of Government policy meant that the problems were getting worse even when the overall economy was improving. There are some lessons that Ministers need to draw from that.

I can see the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property itching to intervene, but I will give way to him when I have completed my point. My belief is that the way in which he is funding FE colleges through the Learning and Skills Council, to churn out paper qualifications makes it harder for people who were already detached from education to go through the doors of the FE colleges. The colleges wanted people who would get a national vocational qualification fast, and increasing numbers were therefore excluded from education and training by the performance indicators and funding systems that Ministers were applying. I would be interested to hear why the Minister disagrees.

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman knows, because we have had this debate before, that all of us, across the House, recognise that there are young people who are not in education, employment or training. I certainly see that in my constituency. That is why we want to take the age to which young people remain in training up to 18. Notwithstanding that, however, he knows—we have had this ding-dong in many television studios—that his figures include young people on gap years. They also include young people who are independently wealthy—there have been more of them, clearly, over the past 10 years—and young people who have had children, who have other commitments or who have particular disabilities. It is important to reflect on those figures and to dissociate them from the young people about whom he is particularly concerned.

Mr. Willetts: There are, of course, a range of reasons why young people are NEET, but I was quoting OECD figures that are comparable. They are on the same basis for Britain in 2005 as they are for Britain in 2000. They allow comparison between Britain and other advanced western countries. Whatever we think about the composition of that group, I am making two points about the trend. First, the trend in the UK was in the wrong direction. Secondly, the trend was in the wrong direction in the UK when the trend in the rest of the OECD, which was going through the same overall economic situation, was in the right direction. The Minister's ingenuity does not explain what was going on.

Mr. Lammy: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that Britain had 10 successive years of growth. That situation was not replicated in other European countries; indeed, it was not replicated in Japan or the US, either. The inclusion in the figures of those who are independently wealthy as NEET makes my point.

Mr. Willetts: I am afraid that I do not follow the Minister's point.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I did not follow the Minister's point, either, but I probably misunderstood because I am sitting directly behind him. I am not making a cheap political point—I understand why the hon. Gentleman is going on about NEETs—but will he look at the new book launched on Wednesday by Oxford university, edited by Richard Pring, and especially the section on NEETs, which talks about the danger of even using the NEET category, as it can lead people towards rather bad answers in public policy?

Mr. Willetts: I have had this conversation with Professor Pring, and I want to make a further point about NEETs in a moment. Let me reiterate: the fact that we have had this economic growth across the west is not the point. I am quoting from the OECD documents on what has happened to NEETs in Britain compared with what happened in other advanced countries and across time. We have an obligation to explain these two trends in the wrong direction.

Let me turn to the practical measures that could be brought forward to tackle some of these problems. My list overlaps with some of the list given by the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, which is a sign of progress for both of us. It is not quite the same, but let me work through the options that are available. My list focuses on teenagers and beyond. The Minister said in passing that I was not a fan of Sure Start—but I think that it does an excellent job. However, I am sceptical about what has been called early-years determinism, which says if we do not fix children's problems by the time they reach the age of three, we might as well give up. We must not become so obsessed with the early years that we forget the importance of providing opportunities for teenagers and adult learners. Sometimes the emphasis on early years has been so strong that we have lost sight of what happens later in life.

Angela E. Smith: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for explaining his position, but he has misrepresented the Government. We have never suggested that we should give up on anything beyond early years, but we feel very strongly that support for early years is a crucial foundation for later development. He said that children's experience in their early years need not determine their destiny, but the evidence is that those years can have a very great impact. If we ignore the early years, it is much more difficult to catch up later.

Mr. Willetts: I do not think that children's opportunities can or should be determined by their experience in the early years. Early years matter, but I expect my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) will speak later in the debate about what has happened to adult learning opportunities. The absolute decline of more than 1 million adult learning places suggests that there has been such an exclusive focus on early years that the opportunities for people later on in life to reshape their careers and get new skills have indeed been reduced.

I want to return to working through my list. The first item about which I think that the Minister and I agree is the importance of careers advice. I want to refer to the Nuffield-Rathbone study—another version of that research was published this week—but my interpretation is slightly different from the Minister's. It is easy to say that there is a problem of aspiration, and the report does contain some evidence in that regard, but the Nuffield-Rathbone researchers present a somewhat different argument.

Interviews were conducted with young people who were NEETs or otherwise disengaged from education and so unlikely to go to university. The study said:

> "At the workshops with young people, all of the participants expressed some form of aspiration, many of which were highly specific...they were able to express clear and precise aspirations."

Those young people aspired to conventional jobs, such as chef, solicitor, holiday rep, bar worker, plumber and so on but, as the study went on to say,

> "it was also clear that they did not have a planned trajectory for achieving those aspirations".

The study added that they were pessimistic about where they would be in 10 years' time.

If anything, the problem has to do with the routes to achieving aspirations. Young people have to find their way through a maze if they want to get the A-levels that they need to get on the course that is best for fulfilling their aspirations. Some very ingenious traps have been laid to send them down the wrong route. It would be perfectly reasonable for a person to think that a law A-level would be a good route to becoming a lawyer, but we know that it is not a particularly good path to studying law at university or beyond. It is therefore not a good way to achieve aspirations in the law.

I remember a fascinating interview on "Woman's Hour" a few weeks ago. A young woman engineer had come up with an ingenious device to serve as a low-energy fridge for the third world. It comprised two containers, one inside the other: the external one held soil or grass that absorbed water, whose evaporation cooled the contents of the internal container. The interviewer said to the inventor, "But you didn't do engineering at university." The young woman replied, "No one told me I needed to do maths for that, so I couldn't do it." It is clear that there are people with great aptitudes and aspirations who are being let down because they are not being given a route through the maze. That is why careers advice is so important.

Mr. Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is making a fascinating speech, but all the research done by the Select Committee and the Skills Commission, which I co-chair, is that the quality of information, advice and guidance for kids from economically challenged backgrounds is very poor. In contrast, middle-class children have a network of uncles, aunts and other people who are graduates and have professional experience and so they get high-quality advice to back up their aspirations.

Mr. Willetts: I accept that. That is why the Government's various changes to the careers service over the past 10 years have really not helped. I do not think that the quality of careers advice, or the creation of Connexions, has helped at all. We believe that there should be a professional all-age careers advice service that independently assists young people who are making their way in the world. There have been at least two sets of changes. The

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dismantling of the Careers Service as it existed in 1997 was a mistake. The chopping and changing on Connexions has not helped. We attach a large amount of importance to independent careers advice. The Minister has to accept that the Government's record of chopping and changing, and of focusing on Connexions instead of independent careers advice, has not helped young people through the maze that confronts them. So the first item on my list is better careers advice from a genuine, independent, professional careers service.

The second item on my list is internships. I remember the launch in January of the national internship scheme by the former Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), using that well-known device, an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*. He identified Microsoft and Barclays as companies that would join that scheme. I hope that the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, who will wind up the debate, can give us some more information about that. Since then, Barclays and Microsoft have made it clear that they already run internship schemes. They seem to have no proposals to change them in any way. We have heard about lists of places in a graduate talent pool that has been launched.

I received a written answer today from the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property. I had tried to identify how seriously the Government were taking the new internship scheme by finding out how much money they had allocated to it. So far as I can tell from his answer, they have put £800,000 into a website. I have to say that it is not at all clear how the 5,000 extra internships are to be financed, or what has happened to the national internship scheme beyond the work on that website on opportunities. That website may be admirable, but it is not quite what his previous boss launched in January.

What has happened to the national internship scheme, and what resources are the Government putting behind it? I am interested in that, because we understand and accept the evidence, which is absolutely clear: the concentration of internships in London and the south-east, and restricted access to them, is a barrier. That is why the Social Mobility Foundation, and its work with internships in this House, is such an excellent initiative. That was the second item on my list.

The third item on the list, of course, is the "three As at A-level" challenge. To get into the competitive professions, which often select from a relatively small group of universities, one needs very good A-level grades. There are a variety of attempts to tackle the problem. We have to be wary of any system that just chucks applicants into the bin because they have been to private school, or because we think that they come from an affluent background. We need measures that are clear, defensible and well understood.

The scheme that has impressed me most is that at King's College, which aims at broadening access to Guy's, King's and St. Thomas' school of medicine. King's College has created up to 50 extra places a year, on top of its mainstream recruitment, for students from state schools in 15 of the poorest London boroughs. It accepts them with A-level grades down to two Bs and a C, but they are subject to an internationally recognised aptitude test, so that there is an objective test of their merit; the scheme is not simply an exercise in social selection. The places are additional, so no one with good grades misses out. There is also an extra year—an American-style foundation year—to bring those students up to the level that is necessary if they are to be properly trained and are to qualify as doctors.

Of course, one can only leave that medical school as a doctor, with a proper qualification, if one has achieved exactly the same high level as others have had to achieve before. None of us wants to have heart surgery performed by a consultant who may not have been very good at it but who at least came from a poor background. There comes a point when sheer objective standards matter and one can pass only if one has achieved those standards. That seems an admirable initiative. Again, I hoped that we might hear more from the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, who opened the debate, about the Department's ideas on how that initiative could be extended.

There are two other items on our list of five. The fourth item is skills apprenticeships and better routes from apprenticeships to university. The Minister said that the UCAS points system would include apprenticeships but that is easier said than done. I have had conversations with UCAS about that, as I am sure the Ministers will have had, but the UCAS application form and website are unclear and there is very little about apprenticeships.

There is a lot of information about the value attached to music grades, for example, and a reference to the value attached to a horsemanship qualification, but trying to track down the value attached to an apprenticeship is not at all easy. UCAS says that its problem, which invokes a separate debate that we have had on other occasions, is that there is such a diversity of training schemes called apprenticeships. The term "apprenticeships" no longer involves simply level 3, but level 2, so it is difficult for UCAS to include apprenticeships automatically on its form. If the Minister, in his winding-up speech, were to flesh out what the other Minister said in her opening speech about exactly how all those apprenticeships will involve UCAS, that would be very interesting. We strongly support such apprenticeships, and I have urged UCAS to do better on identifying them.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point, but what is his view on the solution that the panel received in evidence? There has been a huge growth in the number of apprenticeships, and we can argue about whether that is right or wrong, but opening up such opportunities to a mix of in-college and on-the-job training seems to be a broadly good thing. There is, none the less, a transitional problem when only 0.2 per cent. of apprentices are able to go on to further or higher education, there is at best a silo problem in our training and education system. What would he do about that?

Mr. Willetts: We support apprenticeships, but part of the problem is the new broader definition of apprenticeship which includes level 2 as well as level 3 and is part of the UCAS problem. So far as I know, no other advanced western country calls level 2 "apprenticeships"; by and large that description is reserved for level 3, as it used to be here.

Using some of the Train to Gain budget, we have proposed skills scholarships aimed specifically at funding apprentices to go to university. We made the initia

suggestion because the figures are so low. If the Minister were to give us reliable figures, we would appreciate it, because they are hard to pin down. We suggested funding 2,000 apprentices to go to university and take courses that would enable them to develop the skills that they had already displayed in their apprenticeship, and we thought that it would be a very good use of a modest part of the Train to Gain budget.

Mr. Sheerman: We are enjoying what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but is not the real gap between the traditional three to four-year apprenticeship in engineering—the crème de la crème—and the average one-year apprenticeship in retailing and distribution? In between, we need health authorities, local government, universities—everybody—to create apprenticeships so that there is a much broader mix of apprenticeships. Then they will go through into higher education.

Mr. Willetts: I completely agree, and have nothing to add to that excellent comment. It is one reason why we, through parliamentary questions, have been trying to track the record, not least of Departments and quangos, on apprenticeships. It is a very mixed record indeed, with large swathes of Whitehall not having taken on apprenticeships but giving a very poor performance, which we hope will now improve.

The final item on my list of five barriers to overcome involves opportunities later in life. Many professions tell us that the broader social mix of their recruitment comes from the older people whom they recruit. Sadly, they are able to reach out more widely at that level than they are through the conventional route of 18-year-olds who go to university and are then recruited. Of course, we have to do better with the 18-year-olds and the university route, but opportunities in later life do matter, and we should not forget universities' continuing unhappiness about the equivalent level qualification—ELQ—policy, which means that if someone already has a university qualification in something completely unrelated, and if they want to go back to university and study something else many years later, it is very hard to change career and direction. We should not forget the disappearance of other adult learning places, either.

The Open university, a fantastic institution that does such a good job in spreading access to higher education, has lost £30 million as a result of the ELQ policy. Birkbeck college is an institution with which many on the Labour Benchers have an association: when the ELQ policy was proposed, it lost one third of its students at a cost of £7.8 million. The fact that such institutions, which are particularly devoted to giving people a second chance, were worst hit by the ELQ policy shows that there was a failure to ensure that people have opportunities later in life.

I enjoyed the Minister's speech and I look forward to what the right hon. Member for Darlington will say about his report. If his final proposals match the excellent analysis in the opening two reports, we have much to look forward to.

3.1 pm

Mr. Alan Milburn (Darlington) (Lab): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). At some points in his speech, his insight and knowledge were in danger of creating a progressive consensus in the House; then, however, he lapsed into criticism rather deeper than I would have expected from him. It is also a great pleasure to follow the Minister, whom I congratulate on her appointment to an important post. I know that the work that she is and will be doing on social exclusion, and her knowledge from first-hand experience, will be brought to bear and make an enormous difference to the Government's policy.

I very much welcome this debate, and I thank the Government and the business managers for finding time for it. It is about an important issue. For me at least, how we ensure that as wide as possible a pool of talent gets access and opportunities to pursue a professional career goes to the heart of what a modern Britain should look like. I am proud to have served as part of a Government who have worked so hard over so many years to open up more opportunities to people. One of the things to strike me, following the contribution of the hon. Member for Havant, is that in one sense there is a progressive consensus nowadays in the House. All parties have come to the view that ensuring that Britain is a mobile society is a perfectly legitimate objective—and, indeed, a priority—for public policy.

This debate gives me an opportunity to place on the record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for asking me to chair the panel on fair access to the professions. I also thank my fellow panel members and my excellent Cabinet Office strategy unit secretariat for their hard work.

The debate comes at a particularly timely point in our considerations because we have just finished our call for evidence. As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) on Monday, when I was before the Children, Schools and Families Committee, which he chairs, I have been staggered by the response. There have been 13,000 pages of evidence from a rich variety of organisations. Most importantly of all, we have heard from young people themselves, who have had some stark, insightful things to say to us. We have also heard from employers and representatives of trade unions, schools, universities, professional organisations and voluntary-sector bodies.

That fantastic response indicates that the broad issue of social mobility and the narrower issue of access to the professions strike a chord in the British psyche. They do so for a number of reasons. First, people nowadays recognise the growing importance of professional employment opportunities. As we speak, one in three of all jobs in the British economy are either managerial or professional. As the Minister said a moment or two ago, the number of such jobs is set to rise dramatically in the years to come. Some of the evidence that we have received suggests that fully nine in 10 of all future job opportunities in this country in the next decade or so will be professional in nature. It is possible that once retirements are taken into account, the country will need to recruit a further 7 million professional workers over the course of the next decade or so. At a time of deep and painful global economic recession, it is very easy to forget that our professions—our armed services, our cultural industries, our doctors, our lawyers—are genuinely among the leaders in the world. We should therefore have confidence in the fact that Britain is incredibly well placed to compete in the more knowledge-based economies that we are bound to see in the years to come.

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

Secondly, if the trend of recent decades continues into future decades, and we see falling demand for unskilled labour, as we are bound to do, and rising demand for skilled labour, as will probably occur, there is a terrible risk that we will end up with people who, without qualifications or skills, risk being left behind economically and stranded socially. Already, in this city of London, well over half of all jobs are professional jobs—and a jolly good thing too. In my part of the world, the north-east, the proportion is under one third. Unless appropriate action is taken in the years to come, we risk seeing more employment segregation, not less.

Thirdly, people feel that these social developments offer a great opportunity as well as a great challenge. The generation of the late 1950s, of which I am part, were the beneficiaries of a mobility in society that came about because of a change in the economy—what the academics call more room at the top. In simple terms, more service jobs and more professional jobs became available, which benefited both men and women—particularly, perhaps, women, allied with the huge social changes that we saw in the 1960s. However, a more fluid society was not something that simply happened by chance: it happened in part because a big policy choice was made. It came about as a consequence of Government action, not just inevitable economic and social change. Having won a pretty gruelling war in which so many people in our country made such enormous sacrifices, during that decade—the 1950s—there was a shared determination to win the peace.

I suppose that that commitment found its expression in the huge achievements of the post-war Labour Government—universal education, full employment and a modern welfare state. Millions of people received opportunities that they would not otherwise have done—me included. I have been very fortunate in my life. I grew up on a council estate and ended up in the Cabinet. I sometimes worry whether that might still be possible today; our ambition, surely, has to be to make it so, and I believe that we can. Given the huge changes that we are going to see not just in our national economy but in the global economy, we can, provided that we make the right policy choices, have a second great wave of social mobility in our country, where new opportunities for this generation and future generations are opened up.

Fourthly, we have to be candid in this debate. We can discuss to what extent we have reduced inequality or tackled poverty in recent years, but we can accept that there has, at a minimum, been progress: there are far fewer poor people than there were. That is a great achievement. However, two decades after Mrs. Thatcher declared that the closed shop was dead in the workplace, we still have too much of a closed shop society. The way that I characterise it is this: we might have raised the glass ceiling, but we certainly have not, as yet, broken through it. Among the evidence that the hon. Member for Havant and my hon. Friend the Minister referred to is that which we have received about the nature of professional employment. The worrying thing is that despite the many commendable efforts on the part of the professions—all the initiatives, schemes, mentorships and so on—we have seen greater, not less, social exclusivity. It is not just the fact that three in four of our judges are privately educated. It is not just the fact that fully half of our senior civil servants received a private education. It is not even the fact that although only 7 per cent. of the population attend an independent school, fully two thirds of the Members of the House of Lords and one third of the Members of this place were privately educated. It is broader than that.

Over time, social exclusivity has got worse rather than better across all the professions. The panel's first report indicates that the older generation of today's professionals, people born, like I was, about 1958—a long time ago—on average came from families with incomes 17 per cent. above that of the average family. For the younger generation of today's professionals, the people born about 1970, that figure had risen to 27 per cent. That is the generation of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property. On average, today's doctors and lawyers come from families with incomes two thirds above that of the average family. As the hon. Member for Havant interestingly pointed out, guess which profession has become the most socially exclusive over that period? I use only one word—journalism.

There has been a dramatic change, and the weight of that evidence points to one thing. Despite the progress that has been made over recent times, there is an enormous chasm between where we are and where we need to be if we are to realise the social benefits of a huge potential increase in professional employment opportunities in the years to come.

This is not just an issue for those at the bottom of society. Too many able kids from an average income background or from middle-class families find themselves losing out in the race for a professional job, so this is an issue not for the minority in our country but for the majority. It matters to what President Clinton once famously referred to as "the forgotten middle classes". If the aspirations that most hard-working families have for themselves, their children and their communities are thwarted, social responsibility and individual endeavour are inevitably undermined.

What has struck me forcefully during the course of the panel's proceedings, having listened to young people from a wide variety of backgrounds, is the emergence of what I call the "not for the likes of me" syndrome. People might say, "I am thinking of becoming a nurse, but it is not for the likes of me to become a doctor", or "I might go into hairdressing, but I would never consider a career in law". Something quite profound is happening. When one in two kids whose parents are professionals are willing to consider a professional career, that is a fantastic thing. But when only one in six kids from average income backgrounds—not the most disadvantaged—are willing to consider a professional career, surely we have an aspiration gap that we have to find a way of bridging.

Mr. Hayes: I am so excited by the right hon. Gentleman's speech, and the one that preceded it, that I am obliged to intervene to ask whether he agrees that social cohesion is particularly damaged by what he has just described. It is not that people's aspiration or ambitions have changed, but their means of achieving their ambitions seem ever more remote, leaving them discouraged, depressed, even hostile.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman is on to a very important point. One thing that I am absolutely convinced about, not just from anecdotal evidence but from academic

evidence, is that the problem is not that young people do not have aspirations, it is that they are blocked in fulfilling them. It is not that the country does not have talent—to coin a phrase, Britain's got talent. It's got lots of talent. The issue is how we can unleash it.

Not everybody will aspire to be, or have the aptitude to be, a doctor or a lawyer—of course not. Not everybody will want to come into this place. However, for those who do, surely our objective as a society must be to ensure an equal opportunity, in the best sense of the phrase, for them to achieve that. I fear that that does not exist today.

Mr. Sheerman: I am fascinated by my right hon. Friend's work in listening to young people. Our Committee has also listened to young people, and we have found that physical mobility is a challenge in our country today. When we had national service, in the period to which my right hon. Friend referred, young working-class men in particular were very mobile—they went around the country and around the world for the first time. More and more young people are now stuck on their estates or in their towns and are not very physically mobile. Middle-class children go away to university and are very mobile. Physical mobility is important in raising aspirations.

Mr. Milburn: When I compare my kids' experiences and life chances with those of my childhood, it shows that we are living in a different world. It is amazing, and something to cherish about modern society that, by and large, there are fantastic opportunities for more and more people. We live in a world of opportunity. Notwithstanding the problems of economic recession, we live in a world of greater plenty than ever. However, my hon. Friend is right that, at the bottom end, there is ghettoisation of disadvantage. We should all, regardless of political persuasion or ideology, be deeply concerned about that for the reason that the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) mentioned: the good of our society. That is what we should be bothered about in this place. I therefore believe that the work of my fellow panel members and that of the hon. Member for Havant on social mobility is so important.

I am pleased that social mobility has become such a cause célèbre in modern political discourse. We have a common problem, to which we might not have common solutions, but we are determined to do something about the dichotomy of opportunity to which my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) referred.

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry to have missed the early part of the debate. I will read it in *Hansard* and examine the detail of the work of my right hon. Friend's panel. Has he studied of the need to allow entry to the professions at more mature ages? Does he recollect from his experience as Secretary of State for Health the advent of the Peninsula medical school and the way in which it opens up opportunities for people to enter the medical profession?

Mr. Milburn: Oh happy days! Yes, I do, and I also well remember my hon. Friend's championing of Peninsula's cause. She knows that Sir John Tooke, who does a fantastic job at Peninsula, is one of the panel members. It is not only one of the most progressive but one of the best medical schools in the country—I should have said "and", not "but" in that sentence. It is one of the best because it is one of the most progressive. John is an impressive person who brings great knowledge and insight to the panel's work. My hon. Friend is right. I think that the hon. Member for Havant made the same point in his contribution.

There is a danger in debates on education. There are strong adherents to the importance of early years education, and there are those who say, "What really counts is pre-16", while others say, "In the modern world, where skills are changing ever faster, it's about what happens post-16." However, it is not a case of either/or. We must move from a mindset of educational opportunity having to be about a one-off chance—it is not; it must be a chance throughout life. If ever there were a need to realise the slogan, "lifelong learning", it is now, in the modern world. The world is changing so fast and knowledge is expanding so quickly that if we limit children to a one-off opportunity at 11, 16 or 18, we will do current and future generations an enormous disservice.

Of course, no single lever can prise open opportunities in the professions and no single organisation can achieve that. The subject is far too complex. It is as much about family networks as careers advice; as much about standards in schools as university admission procedures, and as much about work experience as career development opportunities. The panel is looking at all those aspects and many more, but it might help the House to know that we are focusing on a handful of issues in particular and to hear where we are in our consideration of them.

First, how do we provide many more young people with practical exposure to the professions at an early enough stage in their education? There is no shortage of fantastic schemes, including school outreach and mentoring schemes, run by fabulous organisations such as the Brightside Trust, the Sutton Trust, the Citizenship Foundation and the Social Mobility Foundation. Exposure to what it means to be a doctor, a lawyer, a journalist or even—heaven help us—a politician and hearing first hand what it means to do the job is particularly important, as we have discussed, for kids who come from families who have no such exposure to professional careers. Such schemes often have a bigger impact on children's career development than school work experience programmes do, which are crying out for a radical overhaul. Good though the initiatives that I have mentioned are, however, they are pretty fragmented and deeply unco-ordinated. To give one example, only 60 of the 260 combined cadet forces, from which so many future armed service officers are drawn, are based in state schools. The rest are based in independent schools.

That, like so much else, is something that we have to change. So too is the way in which we provide advice and guidance, so that young people can make an informed choice about the career that is right for them. This is the second area on which the panel is rightly focusing attention. Like the hon. Member for Havant, I believe that a fundamental overhaul is needed. We have a more complex labour market than ever before. More than ever, navigating young people through the choices, opportunities and complexities that they now confront requires good careers advice. Yet one survey of students found that three in four were unhappy with the quality of the advice that they had received. A further survey, commissioned by the panel from the very good careers

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website icould and released today, found that 70 per cent. of under-14-year-olds say that they have had no careers advice and that 45 per cent. of over-14-year-olds say that they have had no advice or very limited advice. Girls rate the advice rather worse than boys do.

During all our proceedings, all our hearings and all our evidence-gathering sessions, I have heard barely one good word about the careers work of the Connexions service. I have no doubt that other aspects of its work are absolutely exemplary. However, I can only conclude that its focus on the small minority of vulnerable young people with deep, entrenched and complex problems is unfortunately distracting it from providing good careers advice to the majority of young people. That is simply not good enough. I know that there has been some change, but in my view the service requires a quite radical rethink. I can tell the House that my panel will be making recommendations on precisely how we should do so.

Thirdly, getting a professional job nowadays requires more than aptitude and ability and more, even, than a qualification. People also have to be able to demonstrate work experience. Four out of five employers say that they go on to employ interns. Internships have become, as it were, a new rung on the modern professional career ladder. All too often, however, internships are handed out on the basis of who someone knows, not what they know. Too often, what counts is family connections, rather than open advertisement. That, too, must change. As my hon. Friend the Minister said, most internships in careers such as law are overwhelmingly concentrated in London and the south-east. Because interns usually have to work for free, many young people from average family backgrounds are simply priced out of the intern market altogether.

Again, that is an area on which the panel will be making recommendations for change.

Fourthly, the way in which employers and universities go about selecting their entrants will of course determine the future social profile of the professions. Some make a big effort to recruit widely; others recruit very narrowly. In the end, it is for employers to decide how they go about recruiting their staff, but whereas nowadays we collect and publish data on the gender and racial make-up of organisations to ensure that those such as the civil service are what they say on the tin—and are equal opportunities employers—we neither collect nor publish comparable data on social background. In my view, we need to think very carefully about that.

Mr. Hayes: Does not that tie in closely with the point made by the Chairman of the Children, Schools and Families Committee about the white working-class youngsters who, with few champions and feeling left out, fare worse in the circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman describes? We have made great progress with minority groups, but little progress with those young people.

Mr. Milburn: It is important in these debates to ensure that the emphasis is on all groups and not just on some. However, we also have to recognise that different people from different backgrounds have different starting points in life. There is no equality of life chances at the beginning of life, and public policy will quite rightly want to intervene to ensure that life chances are made available subsequently. My point is a simple one, however. I believe that things have fundamentally changed in, for example, the civil service. There was a time when the debate in the civil service centred on its being all white and all male. That might still be overwhelmingly true, but it is less so. What was the change that made the biggest difference? Of course, some will say that it was the changes in legislation that we passed in this place, but what really made the difference was changes in information. That is an area that we need deeply to consider.

Mr. Sheerman: I fear that Quentin Letts will have another go at me for making this point. Let us look at the diversity of the BBC, which it brags about. According to many criteria, including ethnicity and gender, it is a very diverse employer, but when it comes to social class, we see that people who studied in independent schools are hugely over-represented there. I shall now wait to see the *Daily Mail*.

Mr. Milburn: Yes, I have a feeling it will be coming my hon. Friend's way.

I guess that we knew that, although it is just a guess. That is the point, I suppose. I guess that we had a hunch about it, and we have some rudimentary data, but they are pretty rudimentary. This is an issue of accountability for public sector bodies, including the BBC, to consider. They are funded from the public purse—from the taxpayer's money. They must ensure that they are as broadly representative as possible of the population as a whole that they serve. However, the only way we will ever know whether that is happening is by collecting and disseminating the relevant data.

Mr. Sheerman: I recently wrote an article in the *Fabian Review* that gave me some notoriety. In it, I pointed out that people who are paid from the public purse, including vice-chancellors, head teachers, the heads of children's services and those who work for the BBC, should be expected to send their children to state schools.

Mr. Milburn: That is a slightly more contentious point. Is it time for my hon. Friend to leave?

We know that when universities broaden their base for recruitment, it does not lower levels of achievement. Figures from the Higher Education Funding Council show that students from state schools, once they get into university, perform at the same level as—or at a higher level than—students from private schools who might have got higher grades at A-level. The hon. Member for Havant referred to the fantastic scheme at King's college. In my view, it is an exemplar that all universities and employers would do well to heed. Why? Because it contains this simple lesson: it is not ability but opportunity that is unevenly distributed. The job of universities in particular is to ensure that opportunities are as widely distributed as possible, but some would find it hard to make that claim right now.

Fifthly, entry to a professional job increasingly requires a university degree, as the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings mentioned. In the old days, as he said, journalists could work their way up from a local paper to Fleet street. Nowadays, Fleet street no longer exists and journalism is a graduate entry profession.

Nursing and social care are now joining a long list of professions increasingly becoming graduate entry. There may be, and there often are, very good reasons for that, but there is also the danger that qualification inflation will simply make these professions more socially exclusive than they need to be.

What I find interesting about so much professional work in recent years—the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) rightly defended the professions—can be seen in the teaching profession, which has recently sought to disaggregate and devolve some of its functions to non-graduates, so we now have classroom assistants helping teachers in the classroom. We have health care assistants helping nurses on the wards and we have police community support officers helping police officers on the streets. I think that there is an important lesson to be learned from that, which is how the professions can begin to create new ladders of opportunity by devolving functions down rather than always seeming to take functions and qualification levels up. I can tell the House that my panel is looking at how to extend such opportunities.

Many of the panel's recommendations will, of course, be for the professions to action, and I have seen a lot of willingness on their part to do so. The most progressive parts of the professions are already opening their doors to a wider cohort of talent. I hope that when we produce the report in the autumn, it will very much go with the grain of those efforts. Equally, where there remains evidence of a closed-shop mentality, I hope that we will be fearless in exposing and tackling it. I do not believe that it is only in the country's interest for the professions to fish in a wider pool of talent, as it is in the professions' own interests, too. If the professions are properly to serve the interests of a Britain that is characterised by its rich diversity more than ever before, they, too, need more fully to embrace the notion of diversity. Despite some commendable efforts, that is not, by and large, where I believe they are today.

Achieving that is not just a job for the professions. Of course, they can do a lot more to put their house in order, but what they cannot do is instil in kids an aspiration to pursue a professional career. That has to come from individual citizens, their families and their communities. Neither can the professions create the framework within which individuals will have many more opportunities to realise their aspirations to progress. That is properly the job of the Government.

There is a broader canvas here, which both the hon. Member for Havant and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office touched on in their remarks. In my view—I stress that this is my view and not necessarily that of the panel—it is a canvas on which we need to begin to paint a rather different picture. I said earlier that I am very proud of what this Government have done to open up more opportunities to more people. Like many others, I would have liked progress to have been faster, but it is no mean achievement when the Sutton Trust can report that after decades of social mobility declining in our country, it has now at the very least bottomed out.

That is progress. It is also progress when primary schools in the poorest areas have improved almost twice as fast as those in the most affluent, and when in the secondary school sector, city academies—despite having twice the number of kids on free school meals—are improving their performance at four times the national average. It is also progress when, notwithstanding our debate about early years education, this country has finally begun to learn the lessons from the Scandinavian countries where universal child care has for many years brought enhanced mobility and narrowed inequality.

This, for me, is a fundamental point: the desire to increase social mobility cannot be a substitute for the desire for a more equal society. It is no coincidence that countries as different as Sweden, Australia and the Netherlands are among the most socially fluid in the world. They are also among the most fair in the world. That is why the Government's efforts—despite the obvious challenges—to abolish child poverty are so important, and that is why I hope all parties in the House will make similar firm commitments, backed by firm resources, to achieve that objective.

Breaking the relationship between class origin and class destination is a battle for the long term, which requires an holistic approach. Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel prize for economics, once rightly said families can suffer not only economic but cultural, educational and housing disadvantage. We need to make a fundamental break from the approach that has so often dominated policy in the past. We need to move from the traditional welfare state approach, which seeks to correct the outcome of market-driven inequalities such as family poverty or low wages retrospectively, towards an approach that proactively reduces inequality and advances mobility by tackling the roots of those problems rather than their symptoms. That is not a job for any one part of the Government; it is a job for the whole Government.

Let me give an example. We know that in a modern, knowledge-based economy, education will become ever more the motor of mobility, but despite the good progress of recent years, the attainment gap remains far too wide. A child who is not receiving free school meals is still much more likely to get five good GCSEs than one who is. Less than half the number of black Afro-Caribbean boys get five good GCSEs, although the national average is closer to two thirds.

Like many others, I applaud the Government's efforts to break that cycle of educational disadvantage. City academies, trust schools, a focus on personalised learning and the new soft skill development described in the Rose review are making a difference, and I think that they will continue to do so in future. However, I believe that we need to do more still to ensure that good schools are just as accessible to poorer parents as they are to the better-off. The truth is that the more wealth people have, the more choice they are given. If they are wealthy enough, they can opt their children out of poorer schools and take them to private schools. I have no objection to that. Alternatively, they can supplement state education with private tuition, or use the most potent of all market mechanisms and buy a house adjacent to a good school.

By and large, selection by academic ability has disappeared from our education system, but let us not pretend that selection by social position has disappeared. Unfortunately, we still have an education system in which affluence buys attainment, and that must restrict mobility. There are 25,000 schools in the country. In the overwhelming majority standards are rising, but in 2007, 638 secondary schools containing around 600,000 kids were failing to secure five good GCSEs for 30 per cent.

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of their pupils. Overwhelmingly, those schools have been consistently underperforming for many years, and guess what? They are located in the areas of greatest social disadvantage.

I have long advocated that, in addition to the raft of measures that the Government have rightly introduced to improve standards and discipline and provide good teachers, and in addition to all the other structural changes that have been made, one further step should be taken. Kids and their parents in disadvantaged areas must be given precisely what kids and parents in more affluent areas get, which is more than preference: it is choice.

My proposal to do so, in which I have long believed, is for those parents to be given an education credit—some call it a voucher; I am bothered not what it is called, but what it does—worth perhaps 150 per cent. of the cost of educating their child, so that they can take their child from the school that is failing to deliver good results to another state school that is delivering results. I know that there will be many objections and concerns about such a proposal, but I do not believe that it is right—or that it should be tolerated—to have a situation where too many disadvantaged kids are still let down by the schools system. Overwhelmingly, I repeat, school standards are rising, but sadly the areas where they rise least and where most progress needs to be made are in the poorest areas. The only way in which I believe that can be done is by empowering parents to have greater choice.

That brings me to my final point. I do not believe that we will get social mobility moving in this country if we think that somehow or other it is purely economic distribution that is our problem. We will not get social mobility moving if we think that it is only wealth that is unevenly distributed. It is also power. When you are poor you have precious little power. The sense of hopelessness that clouds the poorest communities in our country grows out of disempowerment. If Britain is to get moving again socially, people need to be able not just to get a job, training or child care but to enjoy far greater control over, and have a bigger say in, how they lead their lives. Beating crime, creating jobs and rebuilding estates all help, but I have long believed that that cloud of despondency can be dispelled only through a modern participatory politics that allows both local communities and individual citizens more evenly and directly to share in power.

One thing is certain. Modern Britain cannot work if it harbours a closed shop mentality. Our economy will not prosper unless we harness the talent of all of those who are able to and aspire to make a contribution. Our society will not work unless people feel that their endeavours and efforts are suitably rewarded. That is why I hope that the work of the panel that I am honoured to chair will help renew our determination in this place systematically to unblock every obstacle that stands in the way of individuals being able to realise their own aspirations to progress. That for me is what modern government is all about and that is why I very much welcome this debate.

3.43 pm

Jenny Willott (Cardiff, Central) (LD): It is a daunting prospect to follow such a knowledgeable and interesting speech from the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) and to have to confess that I am one of the third of Members of this House educated in an independent school. I am feeling waves of class guilt this afternoon. I welcome the Minister to her new role.

Clearly the debate is topical. All three main parties have had commissions of some kind or instituted research into social mobility. It is an important issue to people all across the political spectrum. As the matter has been discussed across the spectrum, some interesting views have been expressed in blogs and in political commentary in newspapers and the media.

There have been mutterings from some quarters that wealthy parents obviously will have children who do better because the parents are likely to be more educated, more intelligent and more motivated and will expect their children to do better, and that that is the real explanation for the lack of social mobility in Britain. There may be something in that, but there are also clear signs that children in Britain from disadvantaged backgrounds who show great potential are being let down. A lot of statistics have been flying back and forth this afternoon, but one in particular sends shivers down my spine: tests on pre-school children at age three show that the initially least bright children from the richest fifth of households overtake the initially brightest children from the poorest fifth of households between the ages of five and 10. That shows not only that there are many influences at play other than genes, but that that happens remarkably fast. I find it horrifying that from the age of three in just two years we see a marked change in children's opportunities.

Education and upbringing are an influence. Those who get a superior education in a school that does not have discipline problems and where the other pupils are keen to learn will have an advantage that sticks with them into later life, and the impact of a private education is much greater than we would expect. For example, students who have a private education are 55 times more likely to be accepted into one of the five best universities in the UK. That is far higher than we would expect as a result of normal opportunity, genetics, parents' expectations and so forth.

The Government are keen to tackle this issue; they have been talking about it, and they have put in place many measures over the past few years. However, the same barriers are still in place, and some of them are even greater than before. Each year, 60,000 people who were in the top 20 per cent. of their school cohort do not reach higher education. That is a lot of people whose potential is being wasted as they enter adulthood. Although the Government have focused on education, there has not been enough progress towards making a step change.

There is considerable evidence that the introduction and expansion of universal education systems in the UK and broadly across western Europe have not led to increases in relative social mobility.

Mr. Hayes: Indeed, the hon. Lady might go further: I would go so far as to say that the expansion of university education over my lifetime has cemented social division.

Jenny Willott: There is an argument for that. Some of the statistics on graduate training show that that has led to certain divisions, and the increase in people going through university has led to the possibility for professions

to insist on a degree. However, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman if he is saying that it is not a good thing to encourage more people to acquire more qualifications through further or higher education; we should all be striving to achieve that.

Mr. Hayes: I was making the point not that that is a bad thing, but that it is a good thing that is largely the preserve of one class of people. Progress in working-class people entering higher education has been stultifyingly slow. Consequently, most middle-class young people now achieve in terms of higher education, whereas most working-class people do not. That is highly injurious to social mobility.

Jenny Willott: There is certainly a class divide in which children go to university and the universities to which they go, and I shall return to that issue shortly.

I agree with the Minister about the importance of early-years education. There is a lot of evidence showing that if we do not sort out some problems at a very early stage, it is significantly harder and more expensive, although not impossible, to solve them later. Making the investment at a very early stage pays dividends in the long run by helping children to fulfil their potential later in life.

I have concerns, however, that where investment has been put in at an early stage, such as in children's centres and Sure Start projects, there is evidence that, contrary to the Government's expectations, middle-class parents have been much better at accessing that additional support than the families at which it is supposed to be targeted. In an unexpected way, the disadvantage of some of the most disadvantaged families has thus been further entrenched.

One Liberal Democrat proposal that could help to address this problem is to increase further the availability of free child care. I have encountered a number of constituency cases where people have been unable to return to training and education after having children because they are not able to access child care tax credits unless they are working. There would be significant advantages to providing wider access to free, very high-quality child care for parents who want to go back to study and to train, particularly those who have not had the opportunity to do so the first time around. I am thinking, for example, of young mothers whose children are likely to start off disadvantaged if that is not provided.

One of the reasons such provision could have a significant impact is that parents who have a low level of skills are less likely to be able to help their children as they go through school. Some 5 million adults in Britain are classified as functionally illiterate, and 17 million adults have basic numeracy problems. Clearly, their children are going to have fewer advantages when they go through the schools system, because their parents are able to provide less support for doing homework and so on. No matter how bright the children are, another layer of disadvantage is ingrained.

As has been discussed, such circumstances also have an impact on expectations. There is evidence that the primary source of expectations in life is one's parents—that seems to be common sense—but the surrounding community and one's school peers also have a significant impact. Someone whose parents went to university is much more likely to expect to go there too. Other parents want what they did not have for themselves and therefore really push their children to go to university, to progress and to get into the professions, but a worrying number of parents do not have any higher expectations for their children than they have for themselves.

Last month, I spoke to a lady in south Wales who had just encouraged her daughter to leave school as soon as she turned 16 and could do so—before she did her GCSEs. The mother took that approach because she had hated school, did not trust teachers and thought school was a complete waste of time. That leaves two generations of a family with no qualifications. That is such a waste of potential, and we really need to find ways of circumventing it and ensuring that there remains a way to motivate young people who have potential and to give them expectations and aspirations. We also need to help people who have those things to see where that could lead and to develop.

Mr. Hayes: I promise that this is my last intervention, because it might eat into my own time, and that would be monstrous. I invite the hon. Lady to make a more subtle point about the difference between expectation and ambition. It may well be that people have ambitions and aspirations but do not have expectations. Perhaps that is the problem.

Jenny Willott: Absolutely, and I think that parents have a very important role to play in that. They may want a lot for their children yet still not believe it is possible for them to achieve it. In such cases, schools and teachers have a very important role to play in building expectations in the children of what can be achieved.

The Minister and the right hon. Member for Darlington mentioned some of the figures on parents' and young people's expectations of going into the professions. There is a more basic difference in people's expectations of their children going to university. More than a third of parents in the A and B socio-economic groups expect that their children will go to university, whereas the figure is about one in 10 for parents in groups D and E. That marked difference goes back to the point that the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) has just made. If expectation is not built in, even if somebody has the ambition to do something they will not necessarily have the ability to take the final step to do it. We need to overcome that by creating other role models for children at both primary and secondary school. Leaving it all to secondary school is too late. We need expectation, ambition and aspiration from a much earlier stage.

Much work has been done to try to get inspirational teachers into schools in deprived areas, and that can make a big difference. My mother-in-law was a maths teacher in a very run-down area of Liverpool, although she was not from that background. Having a diverse range of teachers in schools in deprived areas makes a big difference to pupils who can see different ways for their lives to progress. We need to ensure that we replicate that across the country.

A role could also be played by former students of such schools who have been successful—perhaps who have gone to university and got professional jobs. They could try to encourage more young people to follow them in their success. We have already heard about schemes that have been introduced in universities, schools and independent bodies, but there are some interesting

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schemes that are nothing to do with career progression. For example, Allen & Overy, the law firm, has a scheme in which its lawyers are encouraged to help in schools in east London, perhaps providing basic help with reading. That helps the children, because they get personal attention from someone who focuses on them and makes them feel important. It also breaks down barriers if they see that someone who works as a corporate lawyer in the City of London is a normal human being, doing a job that they could perhaps do themselves. It brings the job closer to the young person so that they see that it is something that they could do. It is important to replicate schemes like that to try to break down some of the barriers that are in place.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the role of careers advisers. I agree that they have a crucial role to play, and at a much earlier stage. I was given my first careers advice when I was about 17 and a half—although the advisers did not recommend that I enter Parliament. By that stage, I had already made choices that would limit what I could do, and we need to look at the choices that young people have to make and give them more options.

Universities could also do a lot more to try to encourage people from more unusual backgrounds to think about attending. My constituency covers Cardiff university, which has a scheme that involves a lot of outreach work in schools in the much more deprived parts of the city. Students work with young people as, effectively, classroom assistants, trying to encourage them to think about university and their options. In particular, female engineering students go into schools to try to encourage young women to think about career options such as engineering that they often will not have considered as a possibility. Given the geographical spread of universities across the country, there is a huge opportunity for them to do more outreach work in schools nearby to encourage young people. There are some very good examples of such schemes already, and it is one important way of breaking down some of the expectational barriers.

Many young people, especially boys, do not pull their lives together and work out what they want to do until they have left school. If we expect everyone to rely on careers advice during their teens, too many people will fall through the gaps. Hon. Members have already mentioned the need for flexible routes into the professions. Some professions are good at doing that. For example, it is still relatively easy – although less common than it used to be—to go into accountancy through a non-graduate route. Nor is it necessary to be a graduate to pursue Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development qualifications. But more could be done to use people's work experience. As the right hon. Member for Darlington pointed out, there are many divisions in some areas, such as PCSOs working with the police and classroom assistants working with teachers, and it is a big step for those who go into the non-graduate jobs to progress to the other roles.

We need to consider making it much easier for PCSOs to use their experience to pursue a career in the police, and for classroom assistants to move into teaching. We must recognise that if they have the ability, the experience that they get on the job can be just as useful—if not even more valuable—as university in enabling them to fulfil a career that would otherwise be considered a graduate-only job. A lot of work could be done to help create career paths that would enable people to move, such as having fewer graduate posts so that people who do not have the opportunity to go to university or who realise later on in life what they want to do can progress into the professions.

Quite a bit has already been said about the need for work experience and internships, and about the barriers that they put up. Clearly, some people find that difficult to access through the necessary contacts or find it expensive. The cost is probably one of the biggest issues for a lot of people from disadvantaged areas. We are just as guilty in this place. A lot of researchers find their work by doing volunteer internships and working in an MP's office, and that puts such a career out of the reach of an awful lot of young people. We need to consider how we recruit staff and try to encourage other people to apply. Internships and work experience are an easy way to get free labour for many of the professions, but they should not be seen as that—because they can be, barriers are being put up that do significant damage to the professions in the long run.

The cost of internships and so on is not the only cost that puts people off. A lot of the professional training takes longer than other routes into work. Medicine requires a five-year degree, and law a three-year degree followed by one or two years of training. Not only do people face the additional cost of studying for a longer period, but they have to put off until later their ability to start earning. That makes it difficult for some people even to contemplate going into those careers. It is just too big a step for them to take right at the beginning. That is why it should be easier to get into those careers later on. Those who had the aspiration at a young age but found the financial barrier too great at the age of 18 would be able to find other ways in through working that enabled them to reach the same end result.

It is also important that we flag up that this is not just about education. The right hon. Member for Darlington mentioned some of the other great barriers that prevent people from disadvantaged backgrounds from being able to progress into professional roles. Elements as basic as expectations and the drive to succeed are affected by other factors as people are growing up. It is not just parents' expectations that affect people's views and aspirations, but those of friends at school and of the community.

One thing that has had a significant impact on people's expectations and aspirations over the past few decades has been segregated social housing. It has exacerbated a lot of the problems in areas that are blighted by crime, family problems and health problems, but there is also a lot of evidence that negative forms of social capital have built up in certain geographical areas that are often associated with social housing. There is much more likely to be a culture of worklessness, higher levels of antisocial behaviour and higher levels of drug abuse. There are likely to be a lack of positive role models in the community, negative peer pressure and a poverty of ambition around people as they grow up, and that has had a significant impact on large numbers of communities across the UK.

That situation is very difficult to unpick, because so many different influences pull down the young people growing up in those communities. We can knock down one barrier by giving them a good education, but if we do not solve the other problems there are still many

barriers to overcome. It makes it much more challenging for them to progress out of the social environment in which they have grown up.

A lot of practical problems are associated with areas where there are concentrations of social housing. For instance, access to private transport is significantly lower, and public transport is often not very good either. That presents a simple, physical barrier to studying, going to job interviews or to working outside the immediate area. Such areas also tend to have poorer-quality public services—not just in education, but in the provision of health, leisure facilities and the other things that children need for self-confidence and a belief in their ability to progress. For instance, it has been shown that sporting activities can have a big impact on young people's ability to work in teams. In turn, that gives them self-confidence and improves their ability to progress, but lack of appropriate facilities can be another disadvantage for people trying to get into work.

The right hon. Member for Darlington talked about ghettos, and I have described how people in severely deprived areas are affected by practical disadvantages in terms of education, health provision and transport. Young people from such areas are more likely to have lower birth weights and to exhibit later behavioural conditions, and to begin primary school with lower levels of personal, social and emotional development. The fact that they are also likely to have higher levels of communication, language and literacy problems means that even the ones with high intelligence and great potential at an early age are held back. Even if we discount the other factors affecting their lives and concentrate on education, it is very difficult for such young people to break out of their circumstances.

I turn now to the question of broader inequality in society that the right hon. Member for Darlington raised at the end of his contribution. Social mobility is not the only problem in that regard, as increasing inequality across society as a whole also plays a part. In 1991, the richest 1 per cent. of people owned 17 per cent. of the nation's wealth, but that proportion had risen to 23 per cent. by 2002. The gap is getting wider.

There has been a huge amount of research internationally into equal and unequal societies. We know that the more unequal a society, the more unhappy it is. We also know that unequal societies have more of almost every social problem, from a greater incidence of teenage pregnancies to higher murder rates, and that the standard of health across the community is less good. As was noted earlier, inequality also generates high levels of what could be called social jealousy or frustration.

In more equal societies, people have more chance to thrive because of their intellect, with their parents' backgrounds being less important in that regard. However, there is a clear link between inequality and social mobility: in all countries, children born of more educated parents are more literate than those from uneducated homes—that is common sense—but the gap between children with uneducated parents and those with educated parents is much smaller in more equal countries than it is in unequal countries such as the UK. In other words, in more equal countries, the built-in disadvantage for children from uneducated, illiterate households is much smaller.

It is to be expected that in all countries there will some differential, based on parental background, in the proportion of young people who go to university and progress into the professions, but the gap in the UK is much wider than could normally be explained by reference to genes, upbringing and so on. All the evidence shows that bright children from disadvantaged areas are being let down by the systems that we have at the moment. In school, they are overtaken at a very early stage by their less bright but wealthier counterparts. They are less likely to go into higher or further education, and they are far less likely to enter a profession. The changes made to education over the years have not made enough of a difference.

I have five, quick suggestions about what would make a difference. The first concerns early-years education, which I have already mentioned. We need much wider availability of really high-quality early-years education that not only enables parents to work, to get trained or to pursue further education, but helps children to develop, and helps to even out some of the disadvantages that they might face right at the start of life. Secondly, we need to look at the housing mix so that we can inject more opportunity and aspiration into deprived areas and break up the deprivation cycle that is pulling people down.

Thirdly, Liberal Democrat policy is to introduce a pupil premium, which would mean that children from disadvantaged backgrounds had more money attached to them. It would follow them into whatever school they went to, which would mean that the finances were in the school to help provide additional support that might be needed. That would make such a child much more financially attractive to a school. If a school gets more money for taking such a child, it would be an incentive for it to do so. That policy might help to ensure a broader mix of backgrounds among young people in schools.

Fourthly, we need to reduce the financial barriers to higher and further education. That does not just mean looking at internships and so on; it also means considering tuition fees and the cost of going to university. For some young people, that hurdle is just too high.

The final issue is non-graduate routes into professions. I am sure that other people will talk about that, too. As has already been said this afternoon, that is not just an issue for the individuals concerned, although it is a criminal waste of human potential in a lot of cases. As a country, we need the best people to be in the top roles. We need the best people as our top soldiers, Cabinet Ministers, doctors and lawyers. If we do not make sure that those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds who show potential are able to get into those jobs, we are all missing out.

I really look forward to seeing the report that the right hon. Member for Darlington is to bring forward. Today, he mentioned a lot of practical suggestions; I hope that we will all be able to pull together behind them, because the issue is not party political. It is a matter in which we all, as citizens of the UK, have a huge stake. Fortunately, it is right at the top of the political agenda of all three parties, and I hope that we can see progress over the next 12 months.

4.12 pm

Mr. Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): This is a truly uplifting debate. I was wondering what I would do in Parliament today, and I looked at the Order Paper and noticed that the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) was going to speak. He gave one of the best speeches I have heard in this place in the four years

[Mr. Charles Walker]

for which I have been a Member of Parliament. It is a great privilege to take part in this debate.

Our routes of travel may be different, but most Members of Parliament want to get this country to the same destination. I did not go into politics as a prosperous, middle-class man to ensure that other people did not enjoy my advantages. I went into politics to make sure that as many people as possible could have and enjoy the advantages that I had and continue to have. I represent a Hertfordshire seat, but Hertfordshire is not simply the sunlit leafy uplands of the home counties; there are many poor parts of Hertfordshire, albeit perhaps not as many as in London. However, there are deprived parts of the county.

When I visit the schools, particularly the primary schools, in the difficult areas, it is wonderful to see all the shiny, smiley faces of the young people—the four, five, six and seven-year-olds—who are busily learning, creating, and absorbing the information around them. They are served by dedicated, hard-working teachers, but the real sadness is that when I talk to the teachers, I find that they can already identify the young people in their care who will struggle to make a success of their lives. All that goodness and all those smiles, yet not all those young children will go on to achieve great things, although the potential is there when they are young. We politicians in this place need to make sure that we allow that potential to blossom and flower.

I had the advantage of an extremely good education. I was lucky: my parents could afford to send me to a good school, and of course I did moderately well in my exams. I am concerned, however, about the gap between youngsters who go to Eton and the best public schools in this country, and youngsters who go to difficult comprehensives, where getting an education is difficult, not because they do not want it but because the circumstances in which it is offered are difficult, with less motivated classmates and parents. For years I thought that it would be wrong in every way to discriminate against children who went to Eton; I thought that someone who got four A*s at Eton should be guaranteed a place at Oxford, Cambridge or one of the other great universities of this country. But at last I am beginning to realise that perhaps three Bs from an inner-city comprehensive may be worth more than three or four A*s from Eton. It may not always be the case, but such a child may well have more potential to go on and achieve true greatness than the child who is spoon-fed at one of our great public schools.

I do not mean any disrespect to our public schools, but I was travelling out to France and, finding myself sitting next to two wonderful young men who were teachers at Eton, I said, "What's it like teaching these young people?" They replied, "It's easy: they're self-motivating; they're programmed to achieve; they compete with each other; there's no view in their mind that they will fail; they're an absolute joy to teach." Those two young men were truly charming, and I wish them every success in the world.

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and is referring to a philosophy in which I have always believed. In fact, Harvard university—the alma mater both of the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy), and of myself—makes huge attempts in its admissions process to look not just at the kids who go to the private schools in New York or Boston. Its whole admissions policy is geared to looking at kids from Watts or Harlem to see how they have performed relative to their peer group, not to kids from private schools. Harvard takes them in with the view that, through its "greenhouse effect", they can then go on to achieve greatness. That does not always work, but we should think about bringing that philosophy to our higher education institutions a little more.

Mr. Walker: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I totally agree with that philosophy. I should like to see more of it in this country.

We cannot socially engineer a perfect solution; it is not within our gift in this place today. However, collectively—we can have robust and passionate disagreement, but we can also come together for this purpose—we can have the very highest aspirations for the young people of this country.

I realise that we politicians are not in good odour, but I am so lucky, because in my constituency there is a wonderful young lady aged 16 who wrote to all the main political parties saying, "I'm interested in politics; I'd like to get involved," and, thank God, we were the first party to get back in touch with her. She is a truly remarkable young woman and she comes from a loving home. I do not call it a disadvantaged home; she just comes from a home where she has had fewer advantages than I had. She is a carer to members of her family, but despite that, was also Hertfordshire's volunteer of the year two years ago. She is the No. 1 academic performer in her school, a truly wonderful person who will go on to be twice if not three times the person I am. That is just fabulous. I want more people who have not had the advantages that Charles Walker has had to go on to be twice, three times and four times the person I am, and I want many of those people to live in my constituency.

As I said a few moments ago, this is a truly uplifting debate. It may not be well attended, but I think that the people in the Public Gallery have walked in on something very special, and it has been a real honour to take part.

4.19 pm

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker), I was not expecting to speak in this debate, but its title captured my imagination. My mother was from the south Bronx and left school in her early teens to make ties. My father was from Newark, New Jersey, and the only job he could get was breaking up the ground prior to the construction of the runway at Newark airport. Unfortunately, he died at an early age. My mother came over here and married an Englishman. I then had great opportunities that I might not have had in my previous life. Today, here I am—the hon. Member for Braintree. Social mobility has worked to my advantage, and this debate is important. I want to focus on some of the issues that have arisen in the 11 years or so since the Government came to power.

In 1997 social mobility was heralded as part of the ideological bedrock of the Government. Tony Blair himself said:

"If we are in politics for one thing, it is to make sure that all children are given the best chance in life."

All of us, on both sides of the House, believe that. The current Prime Minister echoes the sentiment, promising us a social mobility "crusade".

However, the rhetoric and promises of the Government have, unfortunately, run aground on the rocks of reality. Between 1998 and 2006 the number of families living in severe poverty increased by 400,000. Furthermore, child poverty, after housing costs, rose by 100,000 between 2006-07 and 2007-08. As the full effects of the recession continue to unfurl, I expect that the situation for those already in poverty, or those teetering on the brink, will deteriorate further.

Social mobility has stalled; the class divide remains. Thousands of children are being deprived of the opportunity of a better life. The Government have claimed to be the champion of social mobility, but they have fundamentally failed to understand the problem. We do not make people's lives better by telling them that they have a legal right to a better life, by papering over the cracks or by addressing the symptoms and not the causes. The Government need to understand that the only way to give people a better chance in life is to tackle the root causes of the problem and build pathways of opportunity out of the cycle of deprivation. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) on the work that he has done on the issue through the Centre for Social Justice, which he founded.

Too many children are born with wholly unequal life chances. The best possible start in life comes with a stable family life and a stable income. As a start, abolishing the couple penalty in the tax credit system would certainly help. Child poverty is a serious impediment to social mobility. The Government have set a commendable target to halve it by 2010, but their track record suggests that they are unlikely to achieve that goal. They have already missed their 2005 target to reduce child poverty by a quarter from 1998-99 levels. Furthermore, the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that, on the basis of their current policies, the Government will miss their 2010 target as well. I say that with regret.

The inequalities that persist throughout the education system begin even before a child first enters the classroom. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on his work on the panel on fair access to the professions. However, notwithstanding the points that he made earlier, in 2007 the Sutton Trust, founded by my friend Peter Lampl, said that despite 10 years of a Labour Government the best schools remained socially selective—hardly a glowing epitaph for a Government claiming to be the champion of social mobility.

The Conservative policy of making money available for children from the poorest backgrounds through a pupil premium and of ensuring that extra funds follow those pupils to the school that educates them, would mean that wherever they went to school, disadvantaged children would have the extra support that they need. We also need to target deprived schools, which can become ghettos of disillusionment for many who have untapped talents to succeed in life—a point admirably made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker). More money in deprived schools would pay for higher-quality teaching and ensure that help is targeted to where it is needed most. The Sutton Trust has found that the association between adults' education and that of their children is stronger in Britain than in other developed nations. A decent and equitable standard of education can set a child on the right path towards a profession and give not only them, but future generations, a chance to escape the debilitating cycle of deprivation. The upward trajectory of social mobility begins, first and foremost, with education. Young people's time at school and at home helps to shape their aspirations.

Worryingly, the panel on fair access to the professions found that professionals typically grew up in families with incomes well above that of the average family, and that only one in five young people from an average income background and one in eight from a poorer background aspire to be professionals. Young people are not being given the support and advice to direct them along the education and talent development pathways that could lead them to a better life. Already, seven in 10 young people are unhappy with the careers support they receive. We must tap this reservoir of potential in young people from lower-income homes—not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the country's future. By 2020, there are expected to be 90 per cent. fewer unskilled jobs and 50 per cent. more professional jobs in Britain. This is an enormous opportunity finally to make some real progress on social mobility, and the Government should have seized on it long ago.

I would suggest that the Government reflect on some of our proposals if they are not to miss this golden opportunity. A massive expansion in the provision of real apprenticeships at A-level standard could create 100,000 additional training places annually, and a new all-ages careers service and a professional careers adviser in every secondary school and college would help to tap the potential out there. We have also pledged to invest £20 million by the third year of a Conservative Government to provide more than 1,000 bursaries for new university places every year. That would extend to part-time study, and could be decided on in conjunction with employers. However, it is important to remember that social inequalities can persist and continue to inhibit social mobility right through higher education and beyond. When seven in 10 of the top graduate recruiters target only 20 of our country's universities, we can see this as a systemic problem.

We must realise that it is never too late for social mobility, but we must also be able to accept when policies simply are not working. The new deal, one of this Government's flagship policies, has failed to get people back into work and failed to improve people's life chances. For example, in 2008 just 29 per cent. of new deal participants had gone on into employment. For all its hype, the new deal is more of a revolving door back to benefits than a fast track to social mobility; last year, two in every five participants returned immediately back to benefits. That cannot be good. Fully one third of the participants in the new deal for young people have been on the programme at least once before, and 50,000 new deal participants have been on it four or more times. For them, the new deal offers a constant way of life rather than a stepping stone to improve their opportunities.

Welfare requires radical reform if it is to begin to be a tool of personal progress and advancement rather than a constant crutch. Every claimant able to work should be engaged in full-time activity as part of their back-to-work process, including mandatory community work for the long-term unemployed. We also need much tougher

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sanctions for those not willing to return to work. Private providers of welfare-to-work services should have the freedom to innovate and think outside the box, and be paid by the results they achieve.

It seems that the Prime Minister, who describes himself as

"a child of the first great wave of post-war social mobility",

has forgotten where he came from. Under his Government, social mobility has stalled. Today we have a culture in which poverty of hope and poverty of aspiration still prevail. No child should be held back by their background. We need as a matter of urgency both education reform and welfare reform, to ensure that we bring about the necessary change in our society so that every child and teenager can aspire to, and achieve, their life's dreams.

4.30 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this debate on this important subject. Like the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), I am a beneficiary of the social mobility available to those born in 1958. I am delighted to participate, even though it means missing my youngest son Edward's fifth birthday party. With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall wish Edward a happy birthday on behalf of you and the whole House.

Education changes life chances, because the skills and knowledge that people acquire through learning give them the chance to prosper. More eloquently, one of my heroes, John Ruskin, said:

"Education is the leading of human souls to what is best, and making what is best out of them".

Even before the recession began to bite, we were failing to help too many people do their best and be the best that they could be.

We should go further than the right hon. Gentleman suggested. It is not enough to redistribute opportunity; we must redistribute advantage. The uncomfortable truth is that we have not done enough to expand access to the professions, partly because we have not done enough to extend access to higher education. Opportunity for some has not led to opportunity for all. The reason I described the expansion of the education sector as having cemented social division is that our failure to expand opportunities for those from under-represented groups, who do not typically tend to get to university, coupled with graduate recruitment into the professions, has meant that the less advantaged, cut adrift, see opportunity drifting away from them.

In 2005, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) pointed out, the Sutton Trust pointed out that people born in 1970 were less likely to have moved between social classes than those born in the mutual year of birth of the right hon. Member for Darlington and myself, 1958. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said in his opening remarks, the problem has been exacerbated rather than countered by public policy assumptions—over the lifetime of more than one Government.

In the space of 12 years, a child born into poverty has become less likely, not more, to escape the consequences of their birth. Behind that change has been a rise in educational inequality. Young people from the poorest income groups increased their graduation rate by just 3 percentage points between 1981 and the late 1990s, compared with a rise of some 26 per cent. for those from the richest 20 per cent. of families. The clear conclusion reached by the authors of the Sutton Trust's report was that

"the expansion of higher education in the UK has benefited those from richer backgrounds far more than poorer young people."

It is still more dispiriting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) noted, that a raft of Government measures and a deluge of spin seem not to have made much difference, as a recent Cabinet Office report was forced to conclude. As has already been quoted, it stated:

"Broadly, social mobility is no greater or less since 1970".

The latest statistics, released just last week, showed that the number of undergraduates from lower social and economic groups was actually falling. If we failed to expand opportunities when the economy was booming, how can we possibly do so when 100,000 people every month are losing their jobs?

I am not an adherent of laissez-faire. Indeed, as many hon. Members know, I am not a liberal of any kind. I believe that Governments can and do make a positive difference, and, like the right hon. Member for Darlington, I believe that they have a responsibility to do just that.

Governments can influence people's lives; they can change people's lives for the better by laying the foundations for a stronger, broader-based economy and social order, in which people can move more straightforwardly. To do that, we must give people the opportunity to study, to acquire skills and improve their chances to change their lives. Critically, we must give them the wherewithal to do that; wherewithal, not lack of ambition, is the problem. Although the Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property and I agree about much, I think that we probably disagree about that, in nuance if not in substance. I am being as generous as I can, but I shall doubtless hear more about that when he sums up. The critical point about wherewithal is providing the right sort of quality advice and guidance, a subject to which I shall revert shortly and about which my hon. Friend the Member for Havant spoke so eloquently.

However, we must also rethink our perception of study. Instead of forcing people to fit the education system, we must make the education and training system fit people's lives. We will not broaden access to higher education as long as we think that the full-time, three-year university degree is the only or the best way in which to study. Woody Allen—you did not expect to hear from him today, Madam Deputy Speaker—once said that

"80 per cent. of success is showing up".

However, people need to know where to show up. Wherewithal, not aspiration, is lacking. There are high ambitions, but low expectations. People aspire to much because they know that more skilling, training and education is likely to help them prosper, but they do not expect to achieve that because they know too that most of their fellows do not.

It is important to provide people with the information they need to decide when, where and how to fulfil their ambitions. We should deliver higher education at a place, time and pace that meets people's needs. We should recognise that increasing participation does not apply only to 18 to 30-year-olds but to the whole of our society.

Recent Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills research on social mobility—I am not sure whether it is rather vulgar now to mention DIUS, but I will anyway—suggests that there is

"strong evidence of significant returns to degree-level qualifications gained in later life."

Yet the number of first-time mature entrants to HE from all social classes is falling. Lifelong learning provision in higher education is being decimated by the Government's misguided decision to cut funding for equivalent level qualifications.

Last month, a report warned that adult education in HE is

"on the verge of extinction",

with the universities of Bath, Birmingham, Bournemouth, Bristol, Durham, Exeter, Leeds, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, Southampton and Surrey all scaling back or shutting their lifelong learning departments. As hon. Members know—I say "Members", and as I look around, I see the press release emanating from my office: "Hayes galvanises packed House!"—the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education has pointed out repeatedly that approximately 1.3 million adult learning places have been lost. Yet people often find their way back to learning through non-accredited study, for example, women returners, people without a previous successful history of learning, mature learners and disadvantaged learners, such as people with special needs and disabled learners, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (John Bercow) mentioned at the beginning of the debate.

Lifelong learning provision, the loss of which I lament, is critical because it directly affects people such as those not in education, employment or training. We discussed NEETs at the beginning of the debate, but they got scant mention subsequently. However, there is a lot to discuss, so I understand that. All the evidence suggests that young people not in education, employment or training are more likely to find their way back into all of them by taking small steps on the road to learning. Yet the lack of availability of adult community learning means that they cannot take that first step back into education.

To broaden access we need to challenge prejudices about higher education. The rhythms and structures of campus culture are often simply unsuitable for the needs of the under-represented. The ingrained pattern of low participation in some neighbourhoods and among certain social groups requires solutions sympathetic to the lives of different types of learners. The hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott) mentioned child care in that context, and I agree with her. Full-time study is difficult for those who work or have families. The financial burden of living away from home is heavy for those from low-income groups.

We must recognise that different lifestyles necessitate different learning experiences, with more emphasis on part-time courses, community-based learning and modular and distance learning. Through changed modes of learning, we can change the life chances of thousands of potential students. We can and must build bridges between aspiration and HE admissions, achievement and social mobility. As community institutions, further education colleges have a vital role to play in building those bridges, but at present, there are too many barriers to education of all types and at all levels.

Twelve years ago, the late Lord Dearing concluded in his review that much greater flexibility in HE provision was vital to widening participation. His review found that

"a major limitation of the UK system of higher education is that students are offered just one contest—they must clear the 'high jump' of the three/four year honours degree, or fail".

Yet the system has not become flexible in the way Dearing envisioned. If an American leaves university before finishing a full degree, they will describe themselves as having studied one, two or three years at college, implying that they will return to complete their studies later. If someone leaves university or college early in the UK, they are branded a drop-out. There could not be a greater difference between taking a break and dropping out. However, research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation confirms that most working-class students who leave college or university early gain skills, confidence and life experience from their time there and, most interestingly of all, that the majority re-enter higher education later.

Dearing's vision of a transferable credit-based framework has yet to be properly realised, however. He recommended that

"a major part of future expansion should be at sub-degree level...provided in both higher and further education institutions."

FE colleges are uniquely placed to serve those whose lives do not fit traditional forms of university learning, because those colleges are characterised by localness, accessibility and flexibility. Their proximity to non-traditional students' homes, workplaces and previous learning experiences enables them to have an easy reach to the under-represented. However, enrolments for HE and FE have declined and are below their 2001-02 level.

Colleges are often prevented from responding to the communities that they serve because of the byzantine bureaucracy that they face—recognised some years ago, in a report commissioned by the Government and written by Andrew Foster. He said that the

"galaxy of oversight, inspection and accreditation bodies"

was diverting staff, managers and teachers from their proper purpose. Rather than reducing the bureaucracy in further education, the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, which has wended its way through this House and is currently being debated in the other place, adds to it. The Bill, which has been described as "obscure", "opaque" and "obtuse", creates three new bodies with a role in further education. For all its faults, the Learning and Skills Council was a bit like the red army: expensive and big, but at least it was predictable. The new bodies are more Byzantium.

Another recent report by DIUS found that

"the UK is not doing enough to provide a more or less complete online educational experience to students who, for a variety of reasons...cannot enjoy a conventional campus based learning experience."

[Mr. John Hayes]

As a nation, we surely cannot afford to fall behind in e-learning or other forms of distance learning. I commend the work of the Open university, which has led the way in that area, and where I was speaking just this morning.

Opportunity is not enough, however. I repeat that the wherewithal is critical as well. Too often, young people in particular do not get the advice and guidance that they need to turn their ambitions into reality. The Chairman of the Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families made that clear in a brief intervention, and my hon. Friend the Member for Havant and the right hon. Member for Darlington also highlighted the point.

By abolishing the careers service for young people and replacing it with Connexions, which provides support also on issues ranging from housing to drugs and sexual health, the Government have undermined the professionalism of careers advisers. In two thirds of schools in England, careers advice is given by staff without any formal qualifications in the subject. Two years ago, a House of Lords report concluded that young people were not being given the information that they needed to access apprenticeships. A recent study found that 31 per cent. of young people felt that they were not getting enough information about going to university. We heard today from the right hon. Member for Darlington that 70 per cent. of young people in a particular survey said that they had had no careers advice at all. I can add to that: 94 per cent. said that they needed better subject and careers information and support.

This is why we are so fervently in favour of a dedicated, impartial, all-age careers and guidance service. Such a service should have a presence in every school and college, as well as on the high street. Everyone should have access to universally recognised, community-based, impartial advice and guidance about education and career options. This applies not only to young people. As an advanced economy, we have a continuing need to re-skill and up-skill in this recession, and advice for mature learners is also vital.

Education is the key to unlocking individual potential, increasing employability, and building fuller lives for individuals, which in turn helps us to construct a society that works. Each of us must play our part, and feel proud because we are valued in a society that is socially mobile, cohesive and just. As a country, we led the world into the industrial revolution. We also led the world in the growth of the service sector. I believe that we can now lead the world into a new economy, a 21st century economy in which the professions will become ever more important and ever more representative, because people can find their way in those professions, no matter where they started from.

It has been said by speakers across the Chamber today that our economy will need people with high-level skills and the aptitude and ability to adapt quickly to different roles and new challenges. We need an education system that is flexible enough to respond to these new demands. Instead of becoming ever more prescriptive, instructing and dictating, we must look and learn from the best, trust those with a good track record and evangelise to the rest. Instead of telling potential students that they must study in a particular way at a particular place and at a particular time, we should be opening up provision and valuing different forms of lifelong learning. Instead of strangling further education with ever more red tape, we should dismantle the bureaucracy and trust colleges to manage their own affairs. And we should trust learners to make their own decisions, supported by the kind of dedicated professional advice and guidance that I have recommended.

All with stout hearts and sharp minds should have their chance of glittering prizes, should they not? Learning drives social mobility, and the inequalities implicit in a free society can be ethically legitimised only in a social order that allows people to prosper, no matter where they began.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr. Walker) said that this was an important debate on a vital subject. Like him, I am pleased, proud and privileged to take part in such a debate. Surely we want to create a society for which each plays their part, and of which all can feel proud, a nation in which disadvantage is fought and advantage is spread—a Britain that stands tall when it is socially cohesive because it is socially mobile and socially just because it is both of them. To instil Britons with confidence, politicians must be confident enough to be bold. We need nothing less; and nothing less than that is right.

4.50 pm

The Minister for Higher Education and Intellectual Property (Mr. David Lammy): This has been a tough few weeks for the House of Commons, but I think it right to say that this debate has seen the House at its very best. There are, of course, some political differences about the "how" aspects of much of what has been said, but the passion and eloquence with which Members made their case and shared their desire for social mobility and greater access to the professions has been palpable. I am deeply honoured as a member of the Government to have witnessed this occasion.

It is right to say that many hon. Members have a professional background. Much is often said about barristers and lawyers more generally. Since Labour came to power in 1997, however, the barristers have been outnumbered by the large number of teachers and lecturers on the Labour Benches. It is also right to say that our numbers include doctors, architects and former senior members of the armed services. Although the Chamber has not been packed this afternoon, I know that many hon. Members will either have been watching the debate in their offices or will read *Hansard* tomorrow and will agree with much of what has been said.

It is my deep pleasure to pay tribute my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), who is my very good friend. Back in 2002, it was a great honour when I received a call from the No. 10 switchboard and the operator asked me whether I would hold for the Prime Minister. I held—I have never met anyone who has said that they would not hold for the Prime Minister—and Tony Blair asked me to join the Government. I was very pleased to be made a junior Minister in the Department of Health, which was then led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington.

Many in the House will know that my right hon. Friend and I share similar backgrounds. He was raised by a single mother on a council estate in county Durham,

just as I was raised by a single mother in Tottenham. In a sense we have always shared a concern for social mobility. He has had much to say about whether the opportunities he had then exist to the same extent today.

I am obviously not part of the 1958 generation; I am part of the 1970 generation. I experienced my secondary schooling in the 1980s and university in the early '90s. In that sense, I suspect I share much with the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Jenny Willott), who is younger than me and who certainly—*[Interruption.]* If I am not careful, I am going to get into trouble saying any more, but she looks very young indeed!

As regards the evidence that the panel brought to bear on the cohort of young people coming through from the 1970s, I suppose I had reason to reflect on being the exception rather than the rule. I was raised, as I said, in inner-city Tottenham—part of the country that experienced serious social unrest in a period of its history, arising from real problems experienced by its black and ethnic minority community—and I am acutely aware of the community out of which I became a Minister.

Some of that was due to luck—the networks and the social concern that gathered around me, and the youth workers, teachers, priests and others. Internships can provide jobs in the Easter and summer holidays, and can give people their big break. I was fortunate enough—in a sense—to be able to leave Tottenham and to be educated in Peterborough.

I commend my right hon. Friend for a particular dimension of his work. He has not just examined socio-economic disadvantage—the disadvantage that still exists for women and people with disabilities, especially those from poorer backgrounds. He has also been keen to examine geography. We forget how many professions are centred largely on our major cities, particularly the city of London. That is certainly true of my profession, the Bar, but many of our senior doctors and architects are also part of what has historically been a metropolitan elite. Those who grow up in suburban Peterborough, Swindon or Basingstoke, or much further afield—further north, perhaps, in towns such as Middlesbrough—will find it extremely difficult to gain access to the networks that I have described. I look forward to learning from my right hon. Friend's report how such opportunities can be provided, but I know that internships are part of the answer.

Both the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) and the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central pointed out that university was a key element of the necessary journey. Although I wish that the progress that we have made over the past 10 years had been even greater—I think that all hon. Members share that wish—I hope that Opposition Members in particular agree that the Aimhigher programme has made an important difference. This week we are celebrating the work of Aimhigher co-ordinators and associates.

"Westminster Constituency Profiles", which is available from the House of Commons Library, shows that huge progress has been made in nearly every constituency in terms of the participation rates among young people at universities, and that real progress has been made in those among young people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, in the south London constituency of the Leader of the House, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), 525 teenagers went to university last year, compared with 185 in 1997. That is an increase of 184 per cent. In Dagenham, a part of London about which many of us express concern—especially following last week's elections, when progress was made by the British National party—340 youngsters went to university last year, compared with just 125 in 1997. That is an increase of 172 per cent. That is down to the work of schools connecting to universities. Over the past four or five years, we have learned what works. We know that summer schools work and that universities, with buildings that are available for so much of the summer, can make a considerable difference.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, Central mentioned the important role of parents, and their intervention is also important. Manchester Metropolitan and Liverpool universities are extending their work not just with young people in the schools around them, but with their families and parents to lift those aspirations. In cities such as Sheffield or Liverpool, people have seen the university as that place on the hill—an ivory tower; a place that is "not for me". I commend the work of Aimhigher Associates, a recent programme involving young people going back into schools to champion universities and, importantly, to help much younger people in primary school and early secondary understand the process. That goes back to the point about information, careers and guidance. There is a need to understand the UCAS process.

I was told by the vice-chancellor of Bristol university that many courses are less competitive, and that schoolchildren from independent schools understand that and know to apply for courses that need slightly lower grades. However, that knowledge was not present in the state sector. It is now coming in because the associates—those young people who applied a few years ago—have conveyed it to young people.

We need to extend the work and recognise that there are parts of the country where university is a long way away. We must spread networks, which is what we have done through the National Council for Educational Excellence and the work of Professor Steve Smith, the vice-chancellor of Exeter university, who was able to show that every university now has a policy programme on widening participation. The vast majority of universities are offering summer schools and all are working with schools in their local neighbourhoods. There is much more to do, but the programme is in place and the evidence base is there.

With regard to the panel, it is my real hope that we will be able not just to have a conversation about what Government, universities and schools can do but about what the Government, with our expertise, can do in greater partnership with the professions. All of us will recognise that it can frustrating when a particular profession—one has been mentioned several times today—is way behind others because best practice has not filtered through. Part of the panel's work will help us to move to a benchmark of standards for professions learning from one another so that we can make the advance that is needed.

The debate is hugely important for our wider economy—although it is, of course, taking place at a difficult time for the economy. There has been, and will continue to be, a substantial rise in the number of professional and managerial positions in the UK—from one in 13 at the

[Mr. David Lammy]

turn of the century to one in three now, and with the prospect of still further progress over the next decade to 2020. Some studies suggest that up to 7 million new professionals will be needed by 2020, and that does not even take into account some of the new professions. The digital economy will be important to our future. We also know that our future has to be sustainable, and the renewables debate is particularly important in that regard. Technology and engineering are central to our economic future as well, as are the life sciences. All those emerging sectors will provide new professions that we will want to ensure all our young people are able to access.

The labour market's requirement for ever-higher skills and knowledge will place new pressures on teachers not only in schools, but in further and higher education. We also must not forget that the average age in this country is rising, so there will be retirements to consider, and we must ensure that people of a broad age range can access the jobs. There is, therefore, an economic case for the huge importance of this subject, and there is also a social justice case, which was eloquently put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington.

I hope that it is not controversial to suggest that the history of this country has largely been an elitist one. In the 19th and much of the 20th centuries we could get away with that because of our manufacturing economic base. Few people went to university, and skilled jobs were available in manufacturing and in industries such as shipbuilding and coal mining, and also in agriculture, with its heritage of the market towns that there still are in some Members' constituencies. That will not be the right prescription going forward, however. We cannot be content with such a situation. We must recognise that talent exists in all places and ensure that everyone has these opportunities, and the politics and public policy to support that must also be put in place.

The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Newmark) was right to point to Harvard's ability to access young people from the very poorest parts of America. I recall that when I was at Harvard it was the most diverse institution I had studied at other than my primary school in Tottenham, and there must be more that we can do in that regard. There are complications in this picture, however. It is probably right to say that in America the discourse around African-American disadvantage in particular has resulted in an advance in institutions such as Harvard, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recognise that there are significant issues in respect of "the white working-class American", who is, perhaps, not as greatly represented in institutions such as Harvard. This points to a wider debate that goes back to the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington made about the data on socio-economic disadvantage, and I look forward to learning what his report has to say about that.

Hon. Members have also had much to say about information, advice and guidance—that has been the common theme of most contributions. I am pleased that I have been able to work with colleagues in the Department for Children, Schools and Families and that it will shortly publish a new strategy on careers advice for schools. The picture there is complex; it is right to say that the straight comparison between state schools and independent schools is slightly unfair. The cohort and the backgrounds of children who go to independent schools mean that one pays one's money and the return is university. The cohort and the backgrounds of young people in state schools are more complex. The challenges, and defining what success is for teachers, particularly in state schools, make that picture and the job of providing information, advice and guidance much more complex. For that reason we introduced the Connexions service, which has been particularly helpful for the most vulnerable young people in its ability to connect up information about not only careers, but sexual health, drug addiction and other things. We must take a hard look at how to move forward on information, advice and guidance as we progress to this new landscape where local authorities are in the driving seat.

A number of issues are emerging from the work that my Department was doing with the DCSF. We recognised that teacher attitude is important and that many teachers have not experienced our most competitive universities. A few weeks ago, I asked people from Oxford university to come to my constituency to meet head teachers and principals of the local college and the local education authority, because we are still yet to send a young person from a Tottenham school to Oxford. The teachers were asking what an Oxford pupil looks like and what the standard was, because more information on that needs to be available if our teachers are to help. The discussion has been very meaningful and a work programme has been put together, but it illustrates that teacher attitude and access to better information will be very important.

It is also important to recognise that many schools—often those in the most deprived areas—are schools for those aged 10 to 16. In a sense, it is understandable that, as we have been driving up standards to the extent where 46 per cent. of young people get five good GCSEs including English and Maths, the emphasis has been on standards. We need to ensure that the progression routes beyond GCSE and A-level, particularly those into the labour market and higher education, are better understood.

This new strategy is not just about schools; it is also about further education, and information, advice and guidance, particularly that provided between higher education and further education. The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) and I have had much to say over the years about advice on apprenticeships, and I hope that the Bill that passed through this House last year will mean that that will get better, but in FE issues have been raised about the advice to all of our universities.

Mr. Willetts: I am sure that the Minister has looked at the evidence—I believe that the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) referred to this—from the Futuretrack report on applying for higher education, which presented findings from a survey of the class of 2006. It shows shocking ignorance about the options; a lot of people said that they wished that they had had access to advice. What people particularly want—this is what hon. Members on both sides of the House were calling for—is professional careers advice from a distinctive careers service. For whatever reason, that is what has been lost from view with the creation of Connexions. I wonder whether the Minister could say something to recognise the case made by those on both sides of the

House today in support of that initiative: the provision of independent careers advice that cuts across ages and would cover schools, FE and wider matters. I hope that we might hear more from him on that crucial initiative.

Mr. Lammy: I recognise the description that the hon. Gentleman gives. However, I shall not anticipate the report that will be published shortly by my colleagues in the Department for Children, Schools and Families, who will address these issues in their strategy. Nor do I wish to anticipate the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington, who would have something to say about that. I recognise the issue, and as the Minister with responsibility for higher education, I might be expected to be very keen to ensure that young people understand the opportunities that exist.

Much has also been said about internships. These are critical and important, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) was keen when Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills to ensure in this difficult time that the Government do all that they can to galvanise the country to offer more internships to young people as they graduate this summer and into the autumn. I am pleased that we have seen firms such as Network Rail, Channel Four, Abbey and Microsoft and the police and others indicating that they will offer internships for young people.

Many organisations have described their internships as what some of us might call work placements—opportunities within a degree course. Our aim has been to galvanise that attention to life after graduation. Employers are coming on board, and the hon. Member for Havant is right to say that we are offering the graduate talent pool website. We have put money behind that and the Government's role is to co-ordinate and galvanise it. Our efforts must last not just through September but into next year and beyond as different employers seek to offer opportunities for young people that will last for different periods. Whether for three months or six months, young people will have the opportunity to obtain the skills that will put them in a stronger position to gain permanent employment.

The hon. Member for Cardiff, Central mentioned apprenticeships in this place, and it is important to provide opportunities for those who live way outside London. That is why I was in Manchester last week, ensuring that we see a flowering of internships in that city, so that they are available to young people in the north-west.

Much has also been said, especially by the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings, about informal adult learning. We have had that discussion many times in this place, and I hope that he will recognise the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen in the recent White Paper, "The Learning Revolution", which was published only in March, and the new fund of £20 million to help to garner cross-sector projects in that area. There is also an existing £210 million budget, so people should not get the impression that no learning for learning's sake is happening across the country. Of course it is, and it is funded not only by my Department, but by the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. My colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government fund lots of activities in many areas—in particular, they are aimed at achieving social cohesion—to keep the informal adult learning going.

The work that was set up by the Prime Minister in January, which has been taken forward so well by my right hon. Friend the Member for Darlington, is hugely important. It has been a great pleasure to hear the warmth with which the House has commended that work and with which it looks forward to his report later in the summer. Of course, we will have differences about how to do such work. The Government, in particular, are concerned about any proposals for cuts that might lead to problems with apprentices and with routes beyond school. I hope that the hon. Member for Havant will make the case within the Opposition to ensure that the funding is there to increase social mobility.

I am grateful to have taken part in this debate. I commend the work that has gone on and thank all the panel members and the civil servants in the Cabinet Office for all that they are doing. This work will make a huge difference for many young people and adults across this country. It is a tribute to the best that can come from the House of Commons and the metropolitan elite here in London.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of social mobility and fair access to the professions.

Giles Carlyle-Clarke

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Ms Butler.)*

5.22 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset) (Con): I am very grateful for the opportunity to raise again in the House the case of my constituent, Mr. Giles Carlyle-Clarke. It will probably be helpful if I provide a little background to this case, which I think concerns a serious question of human rights. It is also no coincidence that most of the extradition cases that find themselves being discussed on the Floor of this House concern extradition to the United States.

By way of background, I should tell the House that my constituent, Giles Carlyle-Clarke, was extradited to the United States in 2006. He has served a short prison sentence in the US and is now living back in the United Kingdom. It will be recalled that there was an Adjournment debate on the case in this House on 24 March 2005, which can be found at column 1095 in *Hansard*. The then Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), who is now unemployed—

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): She is working. She is still an MP.

Mr. Walter: She is still an MP, of course. On that occasion, she was reluctant to respond and it is also true that she sought Mr. Speaker's assistance in trying to rule the debate out of order on the basis that it might be sub judice. Mr. Speaker supported my position and the debate went ahead, although the Minister was still reluctant to give answers to some of the questions that I raised. I know that she had reservations because she felt that she may have been operating in a quasi-judicial role. However, I believe that she was responsible to Parliament for the decisions that had been made, and that it was therefore appropriate that those decisions should be questioned here in the House.

The subject of this debate is the process behind the extradition of my constituent Mr. Giles Carlyle-Clarke. He was wanted by the US Government in relation to four charges involving the smuggling of cannabis into the US, and the possession of cannabis there, between 1983 and 1988. The charges therefore related to events that took place more than 20 years ago.

Mr. Carlyle-Clarke was extradited to the US in 2005, and I do not intend to deal with the case itself, but it is a matter of record that, in November 2006, in what I think is described as a plea bargain, Mr. Carlyle-Clarke pleaded guilty to charges of drug smuggling. In February 2007, he was sentenced to three years in prison. As I said earlier, he has now been released and is back in the UK.

The case that I put to the Minister at the time of the earlier debate was simple, and it has not changed. To extradite an individual for alleged crimes that the authorities claim took place between 17 and 22 years previously is unjust and oppressive, when that individual has been living openly and not as a fugitive from justice. He and his family have lived at the same address for several hundred years, and he had given that address as his principal residence for at least the 26 years previous to the case being heard.

As I said at the time of the previous debate, the decision is unprecedented, as it seems to ignore article 6 of the European convention on human rights, which states that everyone is entitled to a

"fair and public hearing within a reasonable time".

The Americans had not given credible evidence that my constituent should be extradited. Their evidence was based on statements made by hardened criminals as part of their own plea-bargaining deals. In fact, Mr. Joel Cohen, a former US district attorney, said:

"In my opinion, the methods employed by the Government of the US through their Agent Baker and others in obtaining these three affidavits were not only quite wrong, but rose to the level of egregious misconduct."

He also said that the effect of the American authorities' actions had been

"effectively to destroy the fairness of any trial that Mr. Carlyle-Clarke may face."

However, evidence has come to light since my constituent's extradition to the US that shows that, at the very least, the US authorities misled the Home Office and, by extension, the judicial review conducted by Mr. Justice Pitchford in November 2004. Perhaps more worryingly, though, the British Government failed, either intentionally or unintentionally, to acknowledge that they knew that the American evidence was wrong.

Prior to his extradition, Mr. Carlyle-Clarke had lived and travelled openly, and that included visiting the US in the period since the alleged crimes had taken place. Moreover, until his conviction, he had a clean criminal record.

Central to the American authorities' case was their claim that they did not know where Mr. Carlyle-Clarke was until the end of the 1990s. At the time of the earlier debate, new evidence before the Minister proved that the American authorities had in fact known his identity since 1988, and that they had known of his whereabouts since 1989. In fact, he had served a sworn affidavit on the American authorities in 1989 in which he gave the address in Dorset in my constituency where he had continued to live. He now lives there again, and I have seen a copy of that document.

The basis of the case that I made at the time was that Giles Carlyle-Clarke's lawyers had made a new submission to the Home Office based on dramatic new evidence that had recently emerged in the US. His lawyers believed that that new evidence meant that the Home Office had to reverse its decision to permit his extradition to the United States of America, as the Home Office decision made in 2004 was based on information that turned out to have been untrue.

That new evidence revealed that the US authorities had, in fact, misled the Home Office. They claimed that they had no photographic means of identifying Giles Carlyle-Clarke until 1995. As he had claimed all along, and as was confirmed, the US authorities had a photo of him as long ago as May 1998. I have seen a copy of that photograph, which was acquired from the state's attorney in the US. Accordingly, I claimed in the 2005 debate that the US authorities' reason for delay in extraditing Giles Carlyle-Clarke lacked any credibility. I further asserted that there seemed to be no explanation for the US authorities' delay in applying for the extradition

of Giles Carlyle-Clarke until 1998 for alleged crimes committed between 17 and 22 years previously when they knew of his identity in 1988 and knew his address in 1989.

In their new submission to the Home Office, Giles Carlyle-Clarke's lawyers also requested, under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, that the Home Office release in full its correspondence with the US authorities on the case. I had also written to a Minister to make the same request. In the 2005 debate, the then Under-Secretary, the right hon. Member for Don Valley, responded:

"The request is being considered under the freedom of information procedures, but questions to do with international relations require further analysis before we respond, which we are trying to do as quickly as possible. There is nothing sinister about that: it is simply a question of respecting legal confidences between states."—[*Official Report*, 24 March 2005; Vol. 432, c. 1100.]

That is, it was a diplomatic nicety. In the light of the further evidence that has been revealed, I do not regard that as a satisfactory defence.

I do not wish to dwell too long on the evidence that I highlighted in 2005, save to repeat that Mr. Jefferson Dean, a US lawyer who had been retained by Mr. Carlyle-Clarke, discovered that a photograph of Mr. Carlyle-Clarke had been in the US authorities' possession since 1988, not 1995 as they had previously asserted. In addition, as I have said, Giles Carlyle-Clarke signed a sworn affidavit that was served on the US authorities and gave his home address in 1989. The US authorities had therefore been able to identify Giles Carlyle-Clarke, and had known of his whereabouts, since 1988.

During a period of over six years between 1998 and Mr Carlyle-Clarke's extradition in 2005, the legal process in this country required the then Home Secretary to consider the representations of both the US authorities and Mr. Carlyle-Clarke on the question of delay. However, the Home Secretary at the time persistently rejected Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's version of events. In November 2004, he was informed of the Home Secretary's decision to extradite him to the United States. Also in November 2004, Mr. Justice Pitchford held in the High Court that the Home Secretary was fully entitled to find, on the basis of the evidence before him, that the US authorities did not come into possession of the photograph until 1995 or thereafter, and that Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's defence team was wrong to suggest that there was any evidence to the contrary.

As Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's lawyers had not expected that interpretation of the evidence, they decided to instruct a US-based attorney, Mr. Jeffrey Dean, with a specific brief to find out what the truth was. During his investigation, Jeffrey Dean discovered the new evidence that I referred to at the time.

It might be considered odd that a Member of Parliament should, after a constituent has served a prison term on drug-smuggling charges—charges to which he pleaded guilty—again bring the case to the attention of the House. I do so not only because the earlier evidence points to an unfair and inhumane extradition, but because more evidence, which was made available at the time of the trial by the US prosecuting authorities, shows that there was clear evidence that the Government of the United States and Her Majesty's Government had not only identified Giles Carlyle-Clarke, but were working together on the surveillance of his activities as early as 1987.

I have a copy of a three-page United States Drug Enforcement Agency investigation report, dated 30 January 1987. That, along with several other relevant documents, were made available to Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's US lawyers in July 2006—after his extradition but before his trial. The document relates to a drug seizure off the coast of Mexico and refers to my constituent as "Giles", but, more importantly, it identifies him as the owner of two vessels, including Can Can, which was the vessel involved in the charges on which Mr. Carlyle-Clarke was convicted. The report gave the vessel's location as St. Petersburg, Florida, which is within the United States' jurisdiction, and also identified it as a British-registered vessel, although I think that the phrase used was "flying an English flag". The vessel was on the British Small Ships Register, and any inquirer would have had access to the owner's name and address.

The second document, another DEA investigation report, dated 11 September 1990, is particularly relevant to the US and British Governments. By that date, both Giles Carlyle-Clarke and his yacht, The Can Can of Arne, to give it its full name, had acquired a DEA NADDIS file number. NADDIS stands for narcotics and dangerous drugs information system, and it is well known that Drug Enforcement Agency suspects have such file numbers. That September 1990 report clearly shows that HM Customs was working with the US Drug Enforcement Agency in the surveillance of Mr. Carlyle-Clarke and his yacht. Both agencies were clearly convinced that the vessel was being used for drug smuggling, and the British authorities suspected that it was being used to transport drugs to the United Kingdom. That document confirms not only that agencies of both Governments were watching Mr. Carlyle-Clarke, but the ownership of the vessel, which, although not specifically stated in the report, would have confirmed Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's home address, and that of his mother, who also at one stage owned the yacht.

The key point, however, is that the final decision on the application by the United States Department of Justice for the extradition of Giles Carlyle-Clarke relied upon the submissions of the Alabama district attorney, David York, and the letter of his assistant, Gloria Bedwell, dated 25 February 2005. In it, she states quite categorically,

"The truth is that we did not know who Clarke was or where he was until after Agent Baker got the information from the United Kingdom in 1995. Period."

It is a rather gruff way to write a letter but, none the less, that is how it was put.

I stated at the time of the previous debate that it was, to use a legal phrase, unjust and oppressive, by reason of the passage of time, for Giles Carlyle-Clarke to be extradited to the US. I understand, and I made this point at the time, from leading Queen's counsel who specialise in this area of the law that if the case related to an extradition between Commonwealth countries, it would be held to be unjust on the basis of Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's inability to deal with events so distant in the past, and oppressive because he has lived a new and blameless life in the intervening period. The Home Secretary of the time and Mr. Justice Pitchford accepted that there had been what could be described as a questionable delay, but it is now clear that they both relied on the United States Department of Justice evidence to which I have just referred: evidence that the United

[Mr. Walter]

States authorities could not identify or locate my constituent until 10 years after the event. For reasons that have never been made clear, the proceedings for his extradition and eventual trial took another seven years to conclude.

That evidence—or lack of it—must now be described as both misleading and deficient. There is now indisputable evidence that the United States authorities knew all along who Giles Carlyle-Clarke was. They knew that he was the registered owner of the yacht involved in the offences; they had photographs of him dating from 1988 and a sworn affidavit that he had lodged in an associated case in 1989. All that evidence was available to the Home Secretary before his extradition. However, the Home Secretary chose to rely on the assistant district attorney's statement that the authorities did not know who Mr. Carlyle-Clarke was until 1995, although they still took until 1999 to seek his extradition.

Documents are now available showing that the Drugs Enforcement Agency, the US Government agency responsible for collecting the evidence in drugs cases, had identified my constituent as early as 1987. Its representatives knew who he was. They knew the registration details of his yacht, and therefore his address and the location of his yacht—and therefore probably his whereabouts in September 1990. Not only that, but the British agency responsible for guarding our borders against such activity—Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, as it was then known—also knew all that information, and was working with the United States authorities in pursuing my constituent and his then alleged drug smuggling activities.

That all begs the question whether when the Home Office refused to respond to my and Mr. Carlyle-Clarke's lawyers' requests under the Freedom of Information Act, it was not protecting some diplomatically sensitive material. It begs the question whether the Home Office was concerned that it would be revealed that Her Majesty's Government knew that the statements given by US officials were untrue, that both Governments had full knowledge of Carlyle-Clarke's activities as early as 1987 and that they therefore could not substantiate the claim that the extradition had been delayed because of a lack of knowledge about his identity and whereabouts.

I am not a lawyer, but I can tell when a citizen has been unfairly dealt with by Ministers and the courts. Although Mr. Carlyle-Clarke pleaded guilty to the original crimes and has served his sentence in prison, it still remains the case that the procedures surrounding his deportation could not be described as representative of justice. Those procedures were an affront to my constituent's human rights, and I believe that he is owed an apology by both Governments for an extradition that he believes was obtained by deception. I expect nothing less than that apology from the Minister this evening.

5.43 pm

The Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Phil Woolas): Congratulations are due to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) for raising this issue. As he said, he raised it in a previous debate on 24 March 2005, and I was aware of that as I prepared for this one. I can respond to the hon. Gentleman's speech through my knowledge of the background and through confirmation, where possible, of his account.

However, I was not clear from his speech whether the letter to the Minister was a recent one or whether it was the letter written on the previous occasion. Similarly, I am not clear whether the freedom of information request that he referred to was recent or related back to the previous situation. Will the hon. Gentleman help me on that?

Mr. Walter: I am very willing to help. None of the correspondence to which I referred relates to recent events; it all relates to matters that took place before the extradition.

Mr. Woolas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification; I am sorry that I did not catch it properly at the start. Let me come back to that in a moment.

I can confirm that the hon. Gentleman's constituent, Mr. Carlyle-Clarke, was extradited to the United States in July 2006 to face charges concerning the importation and possible distribution of marijuana. The charges involved the smuggling into the United States, in the years 1986 and 1987, of several thousand pounds in weight of marijuana. He was alleged to have co-ordinated the delivery and distribution of a further quantity of drugs in Alabama in 1988. I think that the hon. Gentleman is in agreement on those facts.

I understand that following the extradition in 2006, the case was heard in 2007. Mr. Carlyle-Clarke was legally represented at the proceedings in the United States and, as has been described, pleaded guilty to the charge put to him, and was sentenced in February 2007 to three years' imprisonment in the US. As was his right, he applied to be transferred to the UK to serve the remainder of the sentence in a prison here. He was transferred in July 2008, and released from UK custody in October 2008. I understand that he was on licence until May 2009; he is now no longer subject to any licence conditions.

The extradition proceedings, which are what the hon. Gentleman is concerned about, are of course long concluded, but I may be of assistance in giving the House a summary of those proceedings. Mr. Carlyle-Clarke fought extradition for several years, and the case was considered at all stages of the process. An arrest warrant was first granted against him by the district court in Alabama in 1992. Under the terms of the Extradition Act 1989, which was in operation at that time, he was provisionally arrested for extradition on 9 January 1998, and remanded on bail. On 4 January 1999, he was committed at Bow street magistrates court to await the Secretary of State's decision as to his return, a prima facie case having been found against him based on documentary evidence and witness statements. He then applied for habeas corpus, but withdrew from that line of legal challenge on 10 November 1999.

Under the 1989 Act, the case fell to the then Secretary of State to decide whether to make an order for Mr Carlyle-Clarke's return. Mr. Carlyle-Clarke was advised that he had the right to make representations by 2 December 1999 against that surrender. Under the procedures of the 1989 Act, in making such a decision as to surrender, the Secretary of State had to take into account not only statutory restrictions on return but, in the exercise of his discretion, any other reason why it would be wrong, unjust or oppressive to order return. The deadline for representations was subsequently extended,

and they were received from Mr Carlyle-Clarke's solicitors on 13 December 1999 and on 1 February 2000. They covered a wide range of matters. Inquiries were then made of the US authorities, followed by a very careful consideration of the representations, including a review of the case law cited in them.

In due course, an order for Mr Carlyle-Clarke's surrender was signed on 3 July 2002. The solicitors then requested that they be allowed to make further representations, and this was agreed, taking into account all the circumstances. Extensive further representations were received on a number of occasions, and further information was received from the United States before reconsideration of the case could be then completed. On 27 November 2003, the decision to surrender Mr Carlyle-Clarke was confirmed. Subsequently, the case came before the courts once more, and on 26 November 2004, the High Court dismissed Mr Carlyle-Clarke's application for judicial review, rejecting all the arguments that had been advanced on his behalf. Again, fresh representations were placed before the Secretary of State for consideration, but the earlier decisions were upheld on 28 October 2005.

Another judicial review application was dismissed on 16 June 2006, with the Court ruling that the claimant had got nowhere near establishing a case of a request made in bad faith, and that a challenge on the basis of the passage of time since the commission of the offences did not avail him. An application to the European Court of Human Rights was turned down on 29 June 2006, and hence the extradition took place the following month. I believe that the issues of fairness and proportionality were dealt with in the High Court case on 16 June, and I have explained its ruling.

This evening, the hon. Gentleman has explained new evidence about the case that he reports has since come to light. As he knows, the UK Government cannot interfere in judicial proceedings in another jurisdiction—and to be fair, I should add that he has not suggested that we should. It is not appropriate for me to comment even if, as in this case, the proceedings have been concluded. However, if he considers it appropriate, he could suggest that his constituent bring any new evidence relating to his involvement in the case to the attention of the relevant authorities in the USA, and seek advice from those who represented him.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that I cannot respond this evening to the new evidence that he has brought before the House. He has asked for an apology, but I suggest that if he wishes to pursue the matter he could write to me, perhaps enclosing a copy of the previous debate, of which I am now aware. We have the case file, of course. As I have said, it is impossible for me or the Government to interfere in the judicial proceedings of another country, and I know that he respects that fact.

As for the implication that the UK Government were either misled or complicit in misleading, either intentionally or unintentionally, I would have to come back to the hon. Gentleman on that. I would express to him the view that it is very difficult for me to comment on specific cases—but that is not said with any intention of blocking any request for information. He has done exactly the right thing on behalf of his constituent in bringing the case to the Chamber of this House, so that his constituent can have his case put through his MP. I look forward to his correspondence if he feels that that is the right way forward. I thank him, and I think that it is best if I leave it at that for this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

5.53 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Friday 12 June 2009

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 0, Noes 32.

Division No. 147] **[9.33 am**

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Dismore and John Austin

NOES

Allen, Mr. Graham
Bellingham, Mr. Henry
Bottomley, Peter
Brown, Lyn
Burt, Alistair
Chope, Mr. Christopher
Davies, Philip
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Goodman, Helen
Heath, Mr. David
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jack, rh Mr. Michael
Jenkin, Mr. Bernard
Keen, Ann
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Lansley, Mr. Andrew
Lewis, Mr. Ivan
Mackay, rh Mr. Andrew
McCarthy-Fry, Sarah
Prentice, Bridget
Rammell, Bill
Ruddock, Joan
Seabeck, Alison
Skinner, Mr. Dennis
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Wicks, rh Malcolm

Tellers for the Noes:
Helen Jones and Mark Tami

The Deputy Speaker declared that the Question was not decided because fewer than 40 Members had participated in the Division (Standing Order No. 41).

Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies and Credit Unions Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

Third Reading

Queen's and Prince of Wales's consent signified.

9.50 am

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

As I trooped through the No Lobby, I reflected that, given the fervour for the modernisation of Parliament, I hope that the modernisers will look critically at the way in which we spend our Friday mornings. The shenanigans that go on are not fit for purpose in a serious parliamentary democracy.

It is my pleasure to present the Bill for its Third Reading. I thank hon. Members for their useful contributions on Second Reading on 24 April. I am grateful for all their comments and questions, and encouraged by the unanimous cross-party support for the measure. We had an equally useful, albeit short, exchange in Committee, and I am impressed with the commitment that hon. Members continue to show to the cause of mutuality and co-operation.

The Bill represents something of a rebranding of societies. It provides for all new societies registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965 to be registered as co-operative or community benefit societies and it sets out the basis on which societies may be registered. The criteria are essentially those in existing legislation and no major change is made to the qualifying criteria.

The introduction of the registration requirement will also ensure that societies can be properly supervised by the Financial Services Authority, thus improving corporate governance over the sector. By modernising the name from "industrial and provident society"—which, I admit, has a historical resonance and status—to terms which are, in any case, in common usage, we can help the sector adopt a modern 21st century status and persona.

Societies that are already registered do not have to register again. If my Bill becomes an Act, societies that register before it is implemented will not be affected by the definitions of "co-operative society" or "community benefit society" in the measure.

The Bill also deals with circumstances in which a society's registration may be cancelled so that it reflects the new registration provisions. The FSA, as registrar, will be able to cancel a society's registration when it does not meet the new statutory definitions. Again, the Bill caters for the status of societies registered, or treated as registered, under the current section 1 of the 1965 Act.

The Bill changes the name of the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965 and that of other Acts concerning such societies so that "industrial and provident societies" is replaced by "co-operative societies" in the titles. That is part of the rebranding of industrial and provident societies.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): On modernisation, perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will consider, given that "industrial" has gone out of vogue,

[Peter Bottomley]

whether that also applies to "Labour", and whether the party should be branded "the Co-operative party" again. Will he remind the House that the registration of credit unions is unchanged, although some provisions affect them? Will he reflect on whether it is right to provide for "the Treasury" to have power to do things when, normally in Bills, power is given to "the Secretary of State", which allows for greater flexibility in Government in later years?

Malcolm Wicks: I will deal shortly with one or two of those issues, not least credit unions, which both the hon. Gentleman and I regard as particularly important in the current economic climate in some of our poorer communities. On his useful—as ever—advice about the name of the Labour party, as every schoolboy and schoolgirl knows, there is a separate Co-operative party, of which I and many other Members are members. Indeed, some colleagues are returned as Labour and Co-operative Members. However, it is always useful to have a tutorial from the hon. Gentleman about the history of the Labour movement, although it is not the subject of the Bill.

The Bill applies the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 to officers of industrial and provident societies, as it applies to officers of companies, building societies and friendly societies. The 1986 Act provides for the disqualification of officers of companies and various bodies when such officers have seriously mismanaged those bodies. Disqualification means being prohibited from involvement in the management of a company or from acting as an insolvency practitioner for a period of time. Under the law as it currently stands, officers of industrial and provident societies who have mismanaged a society cannot be disqualified. Clause 3 will make their disqualification possible.

The Bill provides for greater investigation of societies. It gives the Treasury powers to apply to industrial and provident societies specific provisions of company law on investigating companies, company names, dissolution, and on restoration to the register, which the FSA keeps, of industrial and provident societies.

The Bill also applies part 31 of the Companies Act 2006, which contains provisions to strike defunct companies off the register of companies, to societies. It therefore provides a significantly more streamlined procedure than that which currently applies to societies, and one that will be less onerous on the FSA. The onus to prove that a society is defunct currently rests with the FSA as registrar. The FSA can act only in limited circumstances, frequently after having to devote considerable resources to investigation of a society's status. The new regime will place the responsibility on a society to demonstrate that it is still active. The Companies Act 2006 provisions also contain related procedures governing voluntary striking off, treatment of the property of a dissolved company and restoration of companies to the register.

Parts 14 and 15 of the Companies Act 1989 also come into play. They cover a power by the Secretary of State—by that I now mean the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills; I think that is the correct name for the Department, after a period of being Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and a longer period of being Trade and Industry. I have not walked along Victoria street this morning, but I think I have got the name right this Friday. The Bill gives powers to the First Secretary of State to investigate companies and their affairs, and to requisition documents.

Under the law as it stands, the FSA has certain powers to investigate industrial and provident societies. However, such powers are limited, particularly in respect of those societies that are not regulated by the FSA as providing financial or insurance services. In contrast, the Secretary of State has more extensive powers to investigate companies. That partly tackles the issue that the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) raised about the Secretary of State's powers. The Bill will enable the Treasury to give the FSA powers of investigation of industrial and provident societies, equivalent to the powers that the Secretary of State has in respect of companies.

The Bill also includes important provisions for credit unions. It enables provisions that correspond to building society law to be made for credit unions. The power will allow any provision in building society legislation, which is deemed appropriate, to be mirrored for credit unions. Credit union membership has expanded significantly in recent times; indeed, perhaps I should declare that I have recently joined the excellent Croydon credit union. The best way of allowing credit union law to keep pace with that expansion in membership and operations is to bring it into line with building society law, which is tailored to deal with issues specific to institutions that accept deposits. The power is widely drawn, so as to allow any provisions of building society legislation deemed appropriate to be mirrored for credit unions.

There are restrictions, however, to ensure that specific provisions of existing credit union law cannot be modified. Thus, provisions regarding registration, the use of the name "credit union", the general prohibition on deposit taking, amalgamations or transfers of engagements and conversion of status between credit union companies are safe. There is a requirement that the Treasury consult with the appropriate persons before using the power, which is a reflection of its potentially wide scope. Depending on which provisions of building society law are converted into credit union law, the Treasury might need to

"confer power to make orders, regulations and other subordinate legislation; create criminal offences; provide for the charging of fees (but not any charge in the nature of taxation)."

On Second Reading, hon. Members raised a number of important points, to which I promised to respond in due course. I would therefore like to take a little time today to put on record my reflections on those questions. The hon. Member for Southport (Dr. Pugh) cited some illuminating research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that pointed out some of the risks associated with increasing state and local authority involvement. He wanted assurance that the Bill would not denature credit unions. I think it fair to say that credit unions would welcome the opportunity to attract savings from larger community organisations and local authorities. I welcome that as well, but also recognise the hon. Gentleman's concern. The legislative reforms that this Bill, and, indeed, the Government's legislative reform order, seek to introduce will ensure that the role that people play as individual members, contributors and depositors will not be diminished. Individual membership will continue to be the main focus of credit union membership.

When I spoke at the annual general meeting of the Croydon credit union the other day, I was impressed by the fact that 40 or 50 people had gathered there as members of the credit union to spend an hour and a half discussing the affairs of the union and looking at how it could improve itself. That seemed to be self-help—to use an old-fashioned term—at its very best. Certainly, nothing in the Bill will interfere with that. Indeed, I think it will help to maintain and develop that honourable tradition and ethos.

On the issue of informal financial education for credit union members, I know that the Government, together with the FSA, have launched a scheme, under the brand name "Money made clear", aimed at creating greater financial literacy in education. They have also been working together with credit unions under the auspices of the umbrella group, the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd, to increase financial education among members.

On Second Reading, the hon. Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) emphasised the importance of getting the regulatory regime right for societies, citing the recent fate of the Presbyterian Mutual Society in Northern Ireland as a case in point. Indeed, the problems at the PMS have emphasised the need for societies to make absolutely clear to their members the nature of their investment. That also highlights the need for vigilance by the registrar. I understand that the administrator for the PMS is due to present his report on this sad incident, and it would therefore not be prudent for me to comment further on the matter. However, I would like to say that we all sympathise with the plight of that society and its members, and that we hope that the matter ends in a satisfactory resolution for all those affected.

The hon. Gentleman also inquired why the enabling power granted under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002, allowing the Treasury to amend industrial and provident societies legislation using secondary legislation in line with any changes made to companies law, had not been utilised. I am informed by colleagues at the Treasury that there is every intention to use that power at the appropriate time. They explain that it can be exercised only to apply to industrial and provident societies a "modification" of company law—in other words, a new provision. A large number of the provisions of company law covering the areas that the Bill intends to make applicable to industrial and provident societies are not modifications or new law, and these powers cannot therefore be used in this instance.

Based on my discussions with Treasury colleagues, I can also confirm that the Government intend to consult later this year on the application and applicability of the Electronic Communications Act 2000 to credit unions and industrial and provident societies. It is important for the sector to be able to communicate electronically with its members and with statutory bodies, and I am assured that this matter will be dealt with using all the diligence and urgency that it requires.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) sought reassurance that the Rochdale principles would be applied when registering industrial and provident societies. The Rochdale principles of voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, as well as co-operation among co-operatives, are already enshrined in the International Co-operative Alliance's statement on co-operative identity. I am not aware of any provisions in the Bill that will detract from those important central tenets.

The Bill has received all-party support, and I hope that that will continue today. On one level, it is a legal, technocratic Bill. It is about modernising, and about improving what we might call corporate governance. It is also about introducing measures for co-ops and credit unions to bring them into line with best practice in the corporate sector. We have mentioned the applicability of building society provisions for the credit unions in that regard. It might appear to be a rather dry Bill, but it comes at an important time when we are seeing a revival of interest in the principles of mutuality and co-operation. That revival is partly driven by consumers' concern that goods should be appropriately sourced—without the use of child labour, for example—and by their increasing interest in the quality of products, given rising concerns about health and obesity, for example. The Bill is also being introduced against a backdrop of some corporate financial institutions, not least in the financial sector, having seriously let down the public. It is therefore unsurprising that we are seeing a greater interest in the co-operatives.

Following the historic great leap forward in earlier times, building societies have experienced many years of decline. Sadly, too many of the great societies were de-mutualised and most of them are now totally lost to the benefit of their communities. After that period of demutualisation—which got a lot of excited support at the time from certain segments of society—and a period during which the Co-op shop was simply not competing with the likes of Sainsbury's and Tesco, we are now seeing a revival. I understand the problems that are affecting some of the building societies at the moment. The West Bromwich building society is a topical case in point. Nevertheless, my guess is that a lot of us are rather pleased that our savings and bank accounts are with the Co-operative bank or with one of the mutual societies, rather than with one of the private sector banks that have run into trouble.

Some interesting developments are now taking place that support my optimism about the co-operative and mutual sectors. First, the whole range of local and regional co-operative societies have at long last amalgamated into one Co-op Group. Some societies are not yet members, but 80 or 90 per cent. have amalgamated. Secondly, the Co-op Group is now taking over the Somerfield retail outlets to make it a significant player in the retail sector. Thirdly, we have seen the Co-op bank—perhaps I should declare an interest as I have been a long-term member or account holder of that bank ever since my student days—merge with the Britannia building society to form what some people are referring to as a "super mutual". If we also add on the number of small organisations that are co-operatives—in fishing or some of the big agricultural sectors—we can identify a flourishing of this ethos of co-operation and mutuality.

Should the Bill receive support and eventually Royal Assent, and in some small way succeed in improving corporate governance and modernising such societies and credit unions, that would mean progress towards making the mutual and co-operative sector a significant one in the British economy once again. For that reason alone, the Bill will be most welcome.

10.11 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I warmly congratulate the right hon. Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks) on his Bill and on the way he has conducted it through the House. We have seen a perfect example of the right approach, with him answering points that were quite properly raised by other hon. Members in earlier stages and shepherding his Bill to what I hope will be a successful conclusion today.

I do not know whether it is a proper interest, but I should declare that I am a long-standing member of the Witham Friary friendly society, one of the oldest in the country. That entitles me to attend a quinquennial dinner and, should I ever be debilitated and unable to work, to receive the princely sum of six old pence a week. I am sure that *The Daily Telegraph* will take a considerable interest in that extra emolument available to me if I am ever disadvantaged by illness.

I would like to point to a historical precedent in that one of my most distinguished predecessors as the Liberal MP for Frome was the author Thomas Hughes, who was a great advocate for the co-operative movement. He was the Liberal MP for Frome for only a short time, subsequently becoming Liberal MP for Rochdale, where the connection with the movement is perhaps more obvious. Our part of the world can nevertheless be said to have played its part in the development of the co-operative and mutual movement.

I shall not detain the House with a long speech. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the appetite for mutuality and co-operative arrangements is increasing. A few years ago I was worried, and said so at the time, when we saw the demutualisation of our great building societies. Members of all parties at the time sounded the warning bells that that was an abandonment of the principles under which those organisations had been built up, in an unholy scrabble after major capital for members and the organisations themselves, that could—and, in many cases, certainly did—end in tears. Now, however, there is a real understanding that working in a co-operative way for the common wealth is a beneficial way of organising a business. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we have certainly seen that in the agricultural sector in the selling of produce, but also in other sectors.

I thus greatly welcome further development from the bottom up of these smaller organisations in the financial sector, but they need to develop in some sort of framework—otherwise, they will be open to threats from those who have alternative motives. The right hon. Gentleman's Bill, small as it is—he is right that this is not earth-shattering stuff; it is in some ways a technical Bill—will help to put the smaller mutual arrangements into a proper system of corporate governance and regulation. That seems to me a worthy aim, so I commend the Bill and I will encourage all my hon. Friends to support it.

10.15 am

Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks) would have been as surprised as I was when, on looking into the history of the co-operative movement, I found very little connection with Islington. I know that he has a long-standing connection with Islington, so he will appreciate how much of the history of the labour and socialist movement began there. The only historical information I could find on Islington that is comparable to Rochdale in this respect, however, was that Thomas Paine wrote the "Rights of Man" at the site of the current Co-operative bank at the Angel. *[Interruption.]* I have an excellent researcher, so please leave her a note.

I echo my right hon. Friend's comments on the need to look again at the way in which we conduct our time and ourselves on Fridays; if we modernised, we might be able to use our time for the betterment of Parliament.

It is right to look at the history of the co-operative movement and to understand what has happened so far. Although the Bill has been seen as largely technical and of small import in itself, it remains important if it puts the final brick in the wall needed to ensure that the co-operative movement is properly protected and able to fight on a level playing field with other financial institutions. At a time when we are going through such enormous convolutions and have been hit by dreadful threats to our financial system, the co-operative movement and the system of mutual finance is one that we really must look at carefully and protect. I share the aspirations of other Members to ensure that the co-operative movement once more assumes a very important role in the conduct of our business and financial institutions. I commend my right hon. Friend for the support to the movement that his Bill will provide.

Although the history shows that we have moved a long way from the roots of the co-operative movement, many of its core values continue to inform us today. Despite the changes over the last two centuries, co-operatives remain the same in one crucial respect: they exist to provide mutual self-help for their members rather than to generate profit for investors. They have been driven by their core values of ethical behaviour, and the absence of external shareholders throughout the sector means that there are no conflicts of interest between the claims of consumers and owners, leaving co-operatives no incentive to exploit their customers for short-term gain.

When I met the staff and management of the Co-op shop on Caledonian road, I was struck by the pride they have in their store. It is difficult to run a shop in the Caledonian road area and a number of other shops have closed, but the Co-op is committed to ensuring that a shop is maintained there. It offers a wide range of high-quality products—Fairtrade products, for example, that perhaps have a wider appeal on the Barnsbury side of the Caledonian road—but also good-quality cheap goods. The shop has had to increase its security and, in the teeth of opposition from the local Liberal Democrat council, place cameras outside in the street. It has expanded the shop and shown great commitment—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Lady's remarks must relate to the Third Reading of the Bill.

Emily Thornberry: It is, I think, important for an institution such as that one in my constituency to be supported.

I look to you for guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, but another event took place in my constituency shortly after I was elected. One member of staff at the Co-operative bank at the Angel was killed and another badly injured

as a result of what happened on 7/7. The reaction of the staff and management there was remarkable. They worked with me on arranging a community meeting to celebrate the lives of those killed or injured. Islington continued to pull together—another example of co-operative values that we should all be proud of.

I am not a member of the Co-operative party, although frankly I wish that I were. I have made a number of attempts to become a member. When I stood for election in Canterbury and Whitstable, I wanted to stand as a member of the Labour and Co-operative party, but unfortunately—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that I really must bring the hon. Lady to order. I repeat what I said earlier: her comments must relate to the content of the Bill.

Emily Thornberry: The purpose of the Bill is to remove all legislative obstacles faced by the co-operative and credit union movements, and to level the playing field in relation to other organisations. It represents the culmination of more than 10 years of work done by the Co-operative party in partnership with Government to level the playing field between co-operatives, credit unions and other corporate forms.

The first piece of legislation for the purpose—the Bill that became the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002—was tabled by the then chair of the Co-operative party, Gareth Thomas. It increased protection against the demutualisation of co-operatives, and enabled the Government to use statutory instruments to bring industrial and provident society legislation into line with company and building society law.

The second Bill piloted by the Co-operative party was Mark Todd's, which became the Co-operatives and Community Benefit Societies Act 2003. It built on Gareth Thomas's earlier Act by providing an asset lock for community benefit societies including housing associations, community child care facilities and football supporters' trusts. It prevents the demutualisation of community benefit societies, making them more secure and much more suited to the running of public services. It also addresses a number of contractual and corporate governance issues for societies.

Sir John Butterfill's Building Societies (Funding) and Mutual Societies (Transfers) Act 2007—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to have to interrupt the hon. Lady again, but when she mentions Members of the House she should refer to their constituencies rather than their names.

Hon. Members: Bournemouth, West.

Emily Thornberry: I am grateful for that assistance. I believe that Sir John Butterfill is the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West. His 2007 Act made it possible for different categories of mutual to transfer to each other without demutualising. The success of that Act was key to the proposed merger between the Co-operative bank and Britannia building society.

The long-awaited review of the industrial and provident societies legislation was launched by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Ed Balls) on Thursday 21 June 2007. It was fitting that the task was performed by the first Co-operative party Member of Parliament to fill the post of Economic Secretary to the Treasury, as it represented the culmination of 10 years of work by the party to level the playing field for the co-operative sector.

The following June, my hon. Friend the Member for—another hon. Member—*[Laughter]*—announced the publication of a number of proposals for legislative reform orders to level the playing field further. The fact that so much legislation can be delivered in this manner is a result of the success of the original Industrial and Provident Societies Act 2002.

The legislative reform orders are due to come before Parliament on 6 April. They will modify the provisions specifying the minimum ages for membership of an IPS and for becoming an officer of an IPS, modify the rules on share capital, modify the provisions relating to the fee paid for a copy of the society's rules, facilitate easier dissolution of registered societies, give societies the flexibility to choose their own year ends, and remove the requirement for societies to have interim accounts audited. A recent legislative reform order announced a series of measures for credit unions. There is also a second tranche of orders to be consulted on and laid before Parliament.

This Bill represents the final piece of primary legislation in the jigsaw, and will tackle all outstanding issues that cannot be dealt with by secondary legislation. It proposes to change the term "industrial and provident society" to "co-operative society" or "community benefit society". That strikes me as an excellent change, which will make the purpose of such societies much clearer to people. It is felt that the current title is a disadvantage when the aim is to portray societies as a modern way of addressing contemporary issues. Although the change is mainly presentational, it may be crucial to the way in which societies are perceived, and could play a role in attracting funds for investment.

The Bill also applies the provisions of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 to the special circumstances of the mutual sector. There are currently no powers to disqualify the directors of an industrial and provident society under the Act, nor is there any statutory prohibition on disqualified directors from being members of a committee or board of a society. That seems nonsensical to me, and I am very pleased that we shall be able to bring it to an end.

There appears to be no reason not to apply this legislation, which would be helpful in terms of parity and oversight. It would ensure that industrial and provident societies were regarded as a no less reliable source of governance and oversight than other corporate forms, as well as protecting the public interest.

The Bill gives the registrar powers to require the production of information and documents, to appoint investigating accountants, and to wind up societies in the public interest. There are currently no powers to require the production of information and documents, or to appoint investigating accountants in relation to industrial and provident societies. It is important for that to be changed, and for societies to be brought into the 21st century. Such powers exist in relation to both building societies and companies. There are also currently no powers to wind up societies in the public interest, although such powers exist in relation to companies. The introduction of the new powers would also be

[Emily Thornberry]

helpful in terms of parity of statutory oversight, and in protecting the public interest.

At present, only an Act of Parliament can update credit union legislation in certain respects. The Bill permits the use of statutory instruments when building society law is changed in future to assimilate credit union law with building society law. That may prove crucial in ensuring that credit union law is kept up to date with the latest developments in related fields. There is a credit union in Islington, the Islington and City credit union, which was established in 1997. I hope that we can change the law in order to support that credit union, which is going from strength to strength, so that it can continue to assist my poorest and most vulnerable constituents. There are far too many loan sharks on the streets of Islington, and I wish the Islington and City credit union all the best.

I support the Bill, and I am very pleased that it has been presented.

10.27 am

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): The House will have enjoyed becoming familiar with the hon. Lady's speech just as much as I suspect she did—with the bits that were in order, that is. I had not realised that we had to find something written in our constituencies before taking part in the debate. Oscar Wilde came to Worthing for three weeks, where he wrote "The Importance of Being Earnest", which has no relevance whatever to this debate.

I should declare an interest—or rather not an interest, but a matter of fact. I have a Co-operative bank account and I am a member of the West Sussex Credit Union, which I commend to others. It provides both safe savings and sound borrowings, and I expect many commercial banks to adopt similar principles from now on.

Let me say to the right hon. Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks), who has kindly nursed the Bill through its stages so far, that he has done an excellent job. If he is thinking of any kind of modernisation, he might suggest that this should be a Government rather than a private Member's Bill, although I understand that the various parts of the co-operative movement have had an interest in developing its principles.

If we are going to have to modernise everything—and I note that every candidate for the Speaker's Chair is now a moderniser—it might be an idea, if a Bill is non-controversial, for the Government to consider inviting members of other parties to put their names to Government Bills to show that it is not a case of one side fighting another or taking all the credit for something. Having offered that thought, which I hope is in order, I shall move on.

Malcolm Wicks: I know that the hon. Gentleman was not implying this, but he will know that my Bill is sponsored by members of the Conservative party and by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), the Liberal Democrats' Treasury spokesman, as well as by members of my party. I understand the other point that he made, and we would welcome Conservative support for one or two controversial Bills that are due to be presented.

Peter Bottomley: I thought that the Postal Services Bill had been delayed, but we will do what we can to help the Government.

The right hon. Gentleman made a serious point in observing that the Bill has been sponsored by two Liberal Democrats and two Conservatives. That is what prompted me to suggest that where there are non-party Bills, even though there may be controversy about parts of them, the Government might consider saying, "Why don't we have a big-tent approach to the sponsorship of these Bills, just to show that, behind the principles, there can be all-party agreement?"

The focus on co-operative provision of services should not be to the exclusion of the private sector. It is just as possible in the private sector as in the co-operative movement for a failing shop to be taken over by someone who provides a proper service, and for the shop to develop and grow and for its customers to be grateful. Such a private shopkeeper might be a recent immigrant to this country, and I pay tribute to the many people who came here when the Asians were thrown out of Uganda. They showed that such businesses could be successfully established as family concerns, and that they could serve their customers with just the same commitment as those in the co-operative sector.

The co-operative sector has an honourable tradition, and it comes in many forms. A few days ago, there was a function in Parliament for employee-owned businesses. The range of them is much greater than most people are aware of. I do not think they are covered by this Bill, but they are part of the tradition of co-operation or common ownership, and of alternative forms of ownership more broadly.

As the Bill passes to another place, I would like the Government to think about whether the approach summed up in the expression, "The Treasury can do this, and that, and the other," is always the most appropriate. I do not argue that it is wrong, but I think that the tradition in our legislation of giving power to the Secretary of State is worth considering. I remember being told by my father, who was at the time a junior civil servant, that he had to get a letter to his Secretary of State, who was in Australia. He arranged with the Royal Mail that it would be taken to Hounslow—or whatever Heathrow was called at the time—where it would be put into the hands of a pilot, who would then fly to Sydney and find the Secretary of State. Two hours later, however, No. 10 asked if it could have the letter back—a reshuffle had probably been cancelled, as usual—so my father got in touch with the Royal Mail to ask for the letter to be returned. "Under whose authority?", he was asked. He said, "The Prime Minister's", but he was told that that was not good enough as the relevant Act says the Secretary of State has the power and that this Prime Minister was not a Secretary of State. He was told that the only Prime Minister to have been a Secretary of State was the Marquis of Salisbury, who was Foreign Secretary at the time. As a result, my father had to wander around Whitehall until he found Chuter Ede, the Home Secretary, to whom he said, "Excuse me, my name is Bottomley from the Dominions Office, will you please sign this authority to get back a letter from your colleague the Prime Minister to your colleague Viscount Addison?" and the letter was then withdrawn from the

mail. I therefore offer the thought that using the expression "the Secretary of State" allows any Secretary of State to sign a document if and when needed.

The Bill is useful. Most of its provisions are necessary; some are window dressing, but I do not think that that matters too much. The explanatory notes are valuable and they make it plain that the Bill does not change the registration requirements of credit unions themselves. I therefore hope that those in credit unions will see such references to credit unions in the Bill and will not feel that they have a problem with their current registration.

I hope that credit unions such as the West Sussex Credit Union will grow not just in the provision of services for savers and borrowers, but also in order to raise financial literacy—I think that is the right expression. I hope that young people will get to understand the range of provision of financial services, and also that the old rules about money are probably the right ones: it is all right to borrow, if it is safe; and it is right to save, but the real reason for saving is not just to get a return on the money, but to have something put by for a rainy day, because, as we all know, summer does not last for ever.

10.34 pm

Mr. Nick Hurd (Ruislip-Northwood) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley), who made a thought-provoking speech.

Until now, I have had no dealings with the Bill, so I should start by reassuring the right hon. Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks) that my presence at the Dispatch Box reflects the day of the week rather than any U-turn on behalf of the Conservative party, because we welcome what is a useful Bill. On a personal note, I would like to extend heartfelt congratulations to the right hon. Gentleman for taking the Bill so far. I have had the pain or privilege of taking a private Member's Bill through Parliament: it eventually became the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. Notwithstanding his understandable frustrations at the process, I hope this is a part of his political life that he will look back on with great pride, and perhaps reflect on the irony that so far it has proved easier to change the law of the land as a Back Bencher than it proved to install renewable energy in his home in Croydon despite being Energy Minister at the time.

We welcome this useful Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Mr. Hoban) spoke in support of it on Second Reading. The hon. Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) made an entertaining speech—although I noted how difficult it was for her to get her mouth around the words, "my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton". She reminded us that the Bill should be seen as the latest in a series of private Members' Bills sponsored by Members from both sides of the House that seek to update the legislation on mutuals.

We value the work of mutuals. I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Croydon, North keeps a copy of the "Mutual Yearbook 2008" by his bedside, but it is a good read, and it reminds us of the economic importance of this sector. It employs close to 1 million people and has annual revenue of more than £84 billion. It is therefore a sector that has significant economic weight, as well as an important social impact in the country.

It is probably wrong to pick out any particular sector, but I happened to meet housing association representatives yesterday and they were keen to remind me that they are not just about bricks and mortar; they are also about providing community services through employment, health and education projects. They are important partners of regeneration. A recent audit of those services found that they annually invest at least £435 million in that work.

Whether the bodies in the sector are building societies, housing associations or football supporters' clubs, they need the right legislative framework, and one that is suited to the 21st century, and this Bill provides that. As the right hon. Gentleman said, the Bill addresses four key issues. First, it requires new industrial and provident societies to register as co-operatives or community benefit societies. Secondly, it calls for the renaming of the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts; it has been agreed that the term "industrial and provident society" is arguably an outdated term, and hides the wide range of bodies that can be constituted as mutuals. Secondly, it applies the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 to industrial and provident societies. It is my understanding that there was no outstanding reason why officers of mutual societies should not be dismissed for negligence, as they can be under company law. Thirdly, it gives the Treasury powers to apply to community benefit or co-operative societies the company law on investigation of companies, company names and dissolution and restoration to the register. Finally, it gives the Treasury powers to make provisions for credit unions corresponding to any provisions applying to building societies. The clear theme is one of recognising the contribution mutuals have made to our economy by passing legislation that updates the framework within which they operate.

The Bill has been widely consulted on, and the mutual sector is broadly happy with the proposals. It is customary now to thrash out any issues left hanging after Committee stage, but this Committee stage lasted 14 minutes, at least two of which, I understand, were taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) praising the Bill's sponsor for his integrity and experience. Given the career implications of that, it must have been the longest two minutes of the right hon. Gentleman's life, but I am glad to see that he has recovered from the experience, and has been here today to guide us through proceedings at a steady pace.

At this point, however, we must sound a note of caution. Cross-party consensus must not become an excuse for lack of scrutiny. The Bill is important. It will modernise the legal framework of co-operatives and protect the interests of their members and industrial and provident societies through the provisions. It is not simply a tidying-up exercise. There are instances where co-operatives should be considered as companies and credit unions should become more like building societies, but mutuals are not companies and credit unions are not building societies and should not strive to be. We need to make sure that these legislative reforms are able to deliver the necessary modernisation while protecting the unique status of societies and credit unions. They are not the solution to all our problems either. There have been many casualties in the mutual sector throughout the financial crisis. It is not the case that all mutuals are well managed and it is in the interests of the members and customers of mutuals that their directors are brought

[Mr. Nick Hurd]

within the remit of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. As a result, although support for the ethos of mutuals is unanimous, so should be the recognition that they need effective regulation and the right legislative framework in which to operate. The Bill is principally an enabling one, and much will depend on the secondary legislation and the legislative reform orders that will follow. The standard of scrutiny that we have seen thus far must be maintained. The one thing that did emerge from the Committee was the news that the secondary legislation is yet to be drafted, and even when that has happened, it will be subject to extensive consultation. It is vital that those changes have the support of the sector, and that can be achieved only by proper consultation.

In conclusion, Conservative Members welcome the Bill, which should help mutuals to achieve their full potential through a more modern legal framework. We welcome both the protection that it gives members of mutuals from poor directors and the modernisation of credit union legislation. We wish this welcome Bill well.

10.40 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I am delighted to provide the Government's response to this Bill. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks) for the leadership that he has shown in introducing this Bill and I pay tribute to his commitment to the cause of mutuality. I echo what the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Hurd) said about the achievement that this Bill represents. I know that this is not the first time that my right hon. Friend has piloted a private Member's Bill through the House—he did so with carers legislation—so this is a field in which he is well experienced and this Bill reflects that. It makes an important contribution to improving the framework within which co-operative and community benefit societies and credit unions will be able to work in future.

The Government place a high value on the role that co-operatives and credit unions play in the UK economy. Along with other mutuals, such as building societies and friendly societies, they have had an immense influence on the development of our financial system as it stands today. The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood is right to underline to us the extent and scale of this sector of the economy; mutuals provide a very wide range of services to millions of people up and down the country. The building society sector has traditionally had a very strong presence in savings and mortgage markets, but it is a particular characteristic of mutuals such as credit unions and industrial and provident societies that they reach into communities to help people who might otherwise not have any access to mainstream financial services. That is a particularly important strength that the sector offers.

Mutuals have combined total assets in excess of £400 billion and about half the UK population has membership of at least one mutual, so there is absolutely no doubt that mutuals are a major part of the financial landscape. This debate has touched on the history of demutualisation and people sometimes give the impression that there is nothing left following the demutualisations that have taken place, but that is certainly not the case; this is a large sector that makes a very important contribution, and we need to support it in the way that this Bill will help us to do.

From the Government's point of view there are three major benefits of this Bill. First, by providing support to the mutual sector the Bill will promote choice and diversity in financial services. The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) warned us against the danger of placing too much reliance on the mutual sector and that is a fair point. Nobody in the House—I include my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North in this—would argue that we should be solely reliant on the mutual sector, but there is an important point to make about diversity. After the problems that we have seen in the financial sector over the past year or two, it is particularly clear that the alternative model offered by the mutual sector is one whose value we should not underestimate. Choice and diversity in financial services are an important gain from the agreement of this Bill.

The second benefit to which I wish to draw the House's attention is the Bill's ability to encourage saving and confidence in it. There has been a big rise in the saving ratio over the past couple of years, for reasons with which all of us will be familiar, but it is important that we encourage a culture of saving and that we encourage people to be confident about saving. The mutual sector is making a very important contribution, not least in the availability of child trust fund savings products, individual savings accounts and other products that it offers, which are attractive to an important cohort whom we wish to encourage to save. Credit unions are also clearly making a very important contribution to the culture of savings. That is a second benefit that we can anticipate from the agreement of this Bill.

The third benefit, which was also touched on by the hon. Member for Worthing, West, lies in the promotion of financial inclusion and capability—ensuring that people have information on and access to a range of products that suit their needs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) rightly underlined, we should seek to provide an alternative to loan sharks and the very high cost sources of credit of which we are seeing too much in our constituencies at the moment. It is pretty clear that difficulties in the credit market more generally have pushed people towards those very high cost sources of borrowing over the past couple of years.

The financial crisis has highlighted, in a new way, the traditional strengths of the co-operative model—the mutual model; it has stood up very well through this crisis. As we have been reminded in this debate, this model has a very long tradition and is based on the values of support, the common good and community. I was not present in the House for the Second Reading debate, but I gather that my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North was able to point to a lineage that stretched back to the Romans, so this model has a very long history indeed. In Britain, it arose, in particular, from initiatives on the part of workers to provide their own social safety net at the time of the industrial revolution and from community-based self-help in newly burgeoning towns and cities that allowed poor working families to secure at least some protection from the harsh insecurity and ravages that

accompanied industrialisation and urbanisation. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was right to remind of us Rochdale. I did not know that its Member of the House at the time had previously been a representative of his constituency.

This model has a very long tradition, whereby local community cohesion has provided a very good way of managing credit risk. The bonds formed in communities have proved to be a resilient and sound basis for the development of what went on to become some very impressive and substantial financial institutions. Workers have saved together and borrowed from each other, inspired by the writings of Robert Owen and adopting the model that was put in place by the Rochdale pioneers with the principles that they formulated. My right hon. Friend has reminded the House of that.

Credit unions have a rather different heritage. They originated in rural Germany among agricultural workers and then spread to much of Europe, including Britain, by the end of the 19th century. However, the modern credit unions in Britain have more recent roots, which go back to the 1960s and are linked particularly with immigration from the West Indies, where the credit union movement was a good deal more firmly established at that time than it was in the UK.

We have heard about some of the legislative underpinnings for credit unions, and the Credit Unions Act 1975 set in law the requirement for a common bond, which characterises the movement today. Like my right hon. Friend and others who have spoken in the debate, I am a member of my local credit union, NewCred, the excellent Newham credit union. Unfortunately, unlike my right hon. Friend and his local credit union, I was not invited to address its annual general meeting, although I have spoken to meetings of NewCred in the past. It is another of the patchwork of excellent organisations that several hon. Members have mentioned, strengthening the financial resilience of the communities that we represent.

I wish to associate myself with what my right hon. Friend said about the Presbyterian Mutual Society and the expectation that the administrator will present a report shortly on what happened. I add my sympathies to those that he expressed about the predicament of members of that society and the great anxiety that they have suffered in recent months. I hope that those difficulties will be satisfactorily resolved before too long.

The hon. Member for Worthing, West raised the issue of the Treasury's role in this matter. It is right that the Bill gives powers to the Treasury, because it has policy and legislative responsibility for the mutual sector, of which industrial and provident societies are a part. It is consistent with the powers that the Treasury has in respect of such societies in the existing IPS legislation. The Financial Services Authority has the regulatory role, so in these circumstances—notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman's illuminating anecdote about retrieving a letter from the Royal Mail—it is appropriate that the power is vested in the Treasury.

Peter Bottomley: If the Bill reaches the other place, perhaps it might be possible to unpack in public what the words "the Treasury" mean. Otherwise, perhaps the Minister could write to me. I accept his point, but do those words mean that an official can do it or is a Minister required to do it? That would be useful information to have at some stage.

Mr. Timms: It would depend on the circumstances, but I would be happy to drop the hon. Gentleman a line setting out a response to that point in more detail.

We are living through extraordinary economic times. The global economy is forecast to contract this year for the first time since the second world war. We have seen a worldwide financial crisis more severe than for generations. Against that backdrop, the strengths of the mutual sector have been highlighted, and we have seen mutual organisations playing an important part. We have also seen mutuals suffering alongside other institutions, as several hon. Members have pointed out, but the availability of an alternative model during the difficulties that we have experienced in recent months has been valuable, and the importance of that alternative model has been highlighted in a way that has not been the case in the previous few years.

There was a time when lots of demutualisations were taking place, and it looked as though the value of the mutual sector was not well understood. It is better understood now, for several reasons—and my right hon. Friend has drawn attention to some of them—but not least because of the backdrop of the very serious difficulties that others in the financial services industry have experienced.

In response to the crisis, the Government have taken a range of steps to reinforce the financial system and prevent its collapse, which was on the cards in the autumn of last year. We have also provided direct support for the economy, and we have seen data this week showing that those steps have had the desired effect. We have also cleaned up the banks, enabling them to restructure and increase lending. In the Budget, we also introduced measures to prepare to make the most of the opportunities of the upturn.

At every stage, we have been acting with other countries, because the issues faced by the mutual sector and the financial services industry more generally are being tackled around the world, given the global nature of the crisis that we have been through. That is why we have taken action to strengthen the whole financial system and to restore the flow of credit, which is critical to the success of the economy. We recognise that although banks are the main source of credit in the economy, they are not the only source. We need to build a financial system for the future and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will lay out the Government's thinking on the future shape of financial regulation before the summer recess.

Against that backdrop, and given the problems that we have seen with access to credit for families and businesses, the importance of the mutual sector and the significance of its potential contribution is clearer today than ever. So the provisions in this Bill will stand credit unions and other co-operative financial institutions in good stead to be part of the renewed financial services industry, meeting Britain's needs as we grow out of this crisis. I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House will want to see the importance of the mutual sector reflected in Government proposals for financial services regulation in the future.

The problems that we have seen in the credit crunch have trickled down to households across the country—pensioners worried about their savings, young couples struggling to find a mortgage, and people facing redundancy or the repossession of their home. Issues of personal

[Mr. Timms]

finance have been pushed to centre stage, and the potential contribution of the mutual sector has also been highlighted. We have been able to commit to additional funding to boost the capacity of citizens advice bureaux in these difficulties to provide local face-to-face debt advice. In several instances, that will involve pointing people to the opportunities offered by their local credit union. We have also committed an extra sum of money to increase the provision of free telephone advice from the National Debtline service.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): The Minister is right to talk about the concerns that people have about personal finance. To that extent, it would help them to understand how the Government's spending plans bottom out over the next few years. The Minister is an honest man: can he confirm that the Government plan a 7 per cent. cut—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that we are on Third Reading, and any question must relate to the content of the Bill.

Mr. Timms: I will, of course, respect your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker, although I am disappointed not to have the opportunity to answer the hon. Gentleman's point.

The Government want to see a vibrant and self-sustaining mutual sector, offering high quality services and greater choice for its members. We recognise that one tangible way in which that can be achieved is to ensure that the sector is managed under a modern legislative framework. Increasing expectations from members and global competitive pressures make it important that we have such a framework that will facilitate the growth and expansion of the mutual sector, as well as enable the provision of a high quality service to its members. Those are some of the primary reasons why we welcome and support the Bill.

The main purposes of the Bill, as we have heard, are to modernise and update the law on industrial and provident societies by changing their name; to help to improve their corporate governance framework; and to give the Treasury the power to modify some aspects of the law on co-operative and community benefit societies in line with company law—

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).

Swine Flu Update

11 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Andy Burnham): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the A(H1N1) virus, commonly known as swine flu.

Yesterday evening, the World Health Organisation raised its pandemic alert status to phase 6. The criteria for making this declaration are based on the geographic spread of the virus and not its severity. There is now clear evidence of sustained community transmission in countries outside north America, which means that we are facing the first pandemic for more than 40 years. Across the world, nearly 30,000 cases have been confirmed in 74 different countries. As of today, there have been 909 confirmed cases in the UK. There have been 144 reported deaths in six countries, but none in the UK.

Yesterday's announcement means that it is even more important that the global community works together to limit the impact of swine flu. Over the last few years, the UK has supported the UN system, including the World Health Organisation, in pandemic preparedness and response capacity. We will continue to support the World Health Organisation and its partners in the crucial months that lie ahead.

In response to this particular outbreak, we have also now set aside a further £6 million in additional help for the international response. The WHO declaration does not, of itself, trigger any material change in our domestic preparations, which have been under way for several weeks now and are at an advanced stage.

The Department of Health is continuing to work with other Government Departments, health protection officers and other health care professionals to slow the spread of the virus. That work includes our strategy of giving antiviral drugs for the treatment of those with symptoms and prophylactically to those who have potentially been exposed to the virus, and, where appropriate, closing affected schools. As our knowledge about the virus has increased, we have been able to refine our strategy to be in line with the best public health assessments.

At discussions at the Civil Contingencies Committee this week, we were able to update our strategy to respond to the latest advice. That includes the use of clinical diagnosis rather than laboratory testing alone where there is a high probability that cases are positive and the more targeted use of antiviral prophylaxis, which is where antivirals are provided on a preventive basis to contacts considered most at risk of contracting the virus. In practice, that will include mainly household or household-like contacts, or, in a school context, those at surrounding desks, for example.

We have been monitoring our domestic response continually. The formal declaration of a pandemic should not affect people's day-to-day business and it does not affect our assessment of how the virus is behaving in this country. It is important to stress that the majority of cases in the UK so far have not been severe, with those catching the virus making a full and fast recovery—though a small minority of cases have been more serious.

As I said, the Health Protection Agency reported 909 confirmed cases of swine flu in the UK. Twenty-eight people are known to have been hospitalised and the majority have already made a full recovery. Nearly all those people had previous underlying conditions. We now have enough antivirals to treat half the UK population, with orders to increase that to 80 per cent. We also have orders for 226 million facemasks, 34 million respirators and 15.2 million courses of antibiotics, which will be delivered within the coming months.

The free swine flu information line, along with the nationwide leaflet, TV and advertising campaign, has kept the general public well informed about the steps they can take to protect themselves and limit spread. However, we recognised from the outset that we would be unlikely to prevent a widespread outbreak indefinitely. In recent days, there have been significant increases in the daily number of cases in certain parts of the UK, most notably Scotland, where Health Protection Scotland has concluded that sustained community transmission appears to be taking place. This is characterised by an increased number of sporadic cases—that is, cases with no identifiable link with other confirmed cases.

Those increases come as no surprise and are in line with what we know from similar outbreaks, but it remains the case that, at some point, we will need to move our focus away from limiting the spread of a localised virus towards mitigating the effects of a widespread virus. I want to be clear: that point has not yet been reached. We continue to monitor the situation carefully, and any decision to move to mitigation will be based on the best public health, clinical and scientific advice.

There is always a careful balance to be struck between benefit and risk when offering any drugs to healthy people. The extra knowledge that we have gained during the last six weeks of containment means that we can now refine our approach. The Health Protection Agency will be using all its expertise and clinical judgment to look even more carefully at the circumstances behind local outbreaks before deciding who should be given antivirals.

The single most effective way to limit the impact of any future epidemic is the successful development and distribution of a vaccine. Significant progress has already been made, including the identification of virus prototypes, which are so important in the production of the vaccine.

The declaration of phase 6 is highly significant because it means that manufacturers will now be expected to meet the contractual obligations of advance purchase agreements for vaccine that countries, including ourselves, had already agreed in the event of phase 6 being declared. We are already speaking to manufacturers to agree what this means for our own plans for full country coverage of pandemic-specific vaccine, should it be required. We have advance purchase agreements that enable the UK to purchase up to 132 million doses of pandemic-specific vaccine—enough for two doses for 100 per cent. of the population, should that be necessary. On current projections, we expect the first deliveries of the pandemic vaccine to arrive in the autumn.

Current indications are that seasonal flu vaccine production is well advanced and is expected to be completed in the next few weeks with the requested UK quantities being delivered at the usual time. The WHO does not expect switching to pandemic flu vaccine production to have an impact on seasonal flu vaccine production.

The final important thing to stress is that people should continue to follow our advice on good hand hygiene, and the "catch it, bin it, kill it" messages. They should cover their noses and mouths with tissues when they cough and sneeze, throw the tissue away, and wash their hands. People who have flu-like symptoms should not panic, but should stay at home and check their symptoms using the online symptom checker or the swine flu information line. If people are still concerned, they should call their GP or NHS Direct.

The WHO's announcement is an important signal that all countries should now ready themselves to deal with increased flu cases. The UK has been preparing for this for years. We are recognised by the WHO as one of the best prepared countries in the world, so we are in a very strong position to respond to the global pandemic we now face.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am sure that the House will be grateful to the Secretary of State for giving us an update in the light of the World Health Organisation's announcement yesterday about the move to pandemic phase 6 status.

In addition to thanking the Secretary of State, may I extend through him our thanks to all the staff in the Department of Health, the Health Protection Agency and the NHS across the country for the way they have responded to the spread of this virus? I reflect, as the Secretary of State perhaps has, on the fact that preparation turned out to be very important and useful. The spread of the virus in this country, relative to the spread in some other countries, has been limited. The containment strategy has clearly had a substantial beneficial effect, not least because in Scotland the schools are breaking up for the holidays and because we will shortly be seeing the school holidays in England. There was a risk that if the virus had spread rapidly it could have had a big impact on the public examination system, but it did not have as big an impact as it might have done. The containment strategy worked well, from that point of view. We should convey our thanks to all the staff involved.

I entirely endorse what the Secretary of State had to say about the desirability of maintaining a containment strategy while we can do so, and agree that it is perfectly reasonable to do so with more limited use of antiviral drugs, if we can do that. We do not want to medicate people if it is not necessary. Clearly in Scotland, and perhaps soon in England, we may need to move to a mitigation strategy rather than a containment strategy, and in that context, and bearing in mind the risks of a substantial recurrence of the virus in the autumn—in our flu season—the need for preparation is even greater now that we are in a pandemic phase. We will increasingly see additional cases coming into this country from overseas, as well as community transmission in this country. To that end, may I ask the Secretary of State a number of further questions about the preparations that we undertake in this country?

The Secretary of State will have observed that Professor Neil Ferguson's report the other day suggested the desirability of surveillance in hospitals of young adults,

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

who present with respiratory illness, as the virus seems not to attack the elderly particularly, and to attack young adults especially. Does he propose that the Department and the NHS encourage that surveillance?

The Secretary of State has talked about the current strategy of restricting the use of antivirals to close contacts. He will know that our view is that we should, in the mitigation phase, continue to pursue what is called a household prophylaxis strategy—that is, we think that close contacts of people who are confirmed or suspected of having the virus should be offered antivirals. In that context, he will know that the phase 6 alert from the WHO, under the contingency plan, should trigger the national pandemic flu line, which is not the same thing as the free swine flu information line. People should be able to ring the pandemic flu line to have their diagnosis confirmed, to have a prescription for antiviral drugs confirmed, to be given a unique number, and to be told where their collection point is.

On that flu line, in papers supplied only a few months ago to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, the Department of Health said:

"Signing the contract in December"—

that is, December 2008—

"should mean that the National Flu Line Service system is available for use in the event of a pandemic by April/May 2009."

The Secretary of State knows that that is not the case, and that the national flu line is not available, even though it is due. Will he explain why? In addition, the national flu line should link to the distribution of antivirals through collection points. The same document said:

"In line with the NHS Operating Framework, the target date for identification of Antiviral Collection Points is the end of December 2008."

So by now, primary care trusts across the country should know where those collection points are, but clearly they do not. There appears to be continuing uncertainty and confusion among community pharmacies about whether they should, or should not, be the antiviral collection points. Will the Secretary of State confirm that in many cases they should be? Community pharmacies that currently seem uncertain about whether they should be a collection point, and resistant to the thought, should be. We are not talking about people with flu symptoms visiting their local pharmacies; clearly they should not do that. We are talking about flu friends visiting local pharmacies.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that we have a further debate about the issue of school closures in the autumn? If the virus continues to be relatively modest in its severity, there will be an argument that school closures may be an excessive response, but there is also an argument that if there is a very large number of cases, and if schools look like they are places where the virus will spread rapidly, there would be a risk that if we did not close schools for a short period where cases were confirmed, we would overwhelm local health service facilities.

On health care facilities, can the Secretary of State say what measures have been taken to extend critical care capacity for the coming flu season? What has been done to make available teams trained in the use of non-invasive ventilatory support? The document from the Department on surge capacity suggests that in the case of this virus, such a strategy might be desirable. Can he say further, or let us know later—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Sylvia Heal): Order. May I ask the shadow Secretary of State to begin to draw his comments to a close, because we are interrupting discussion on private Members' Bills, and there are quite a few Members hoping to catch my eye?

Mr. Lansley: I have just a couple of questions to ask, if I may, about critical capacity. Under what circumstances might elective work in hospitals be stopped, and what has happened to the concept of enhanced rest centres, which were to have helped to offset the pressure in the acute sector? Finally, what more can we do to help developing countries, in addition to providing £6 million for that purpose? What would happen, for example, if the virus were to reach South Africa in its current flu season? It is a developing country that has a serious problem with the risk of HIV immune-compromised patients, but its medical system would have the capacity to deliver antivirals rapidly to patients if the country had access to sufficient antivirals; many developing countries do not have that capacity. Can we contrive to assist southern Africa, for example, in responding to the outbreak?

Andy Burnham: I thank the shadow Health Secretary for the measured tone of his comments, and the help that he has given us today to ensure that together we can give a reassuring message to the public, as we should. I strongly agree with him that we in the House should today send our thanks to staff in my Department—the Department of Health—and the Health Protection Agency, and to front-line NHS, public health and local government staff, who are working on the ground to ensure that we are in a strong position to deal with the outbreak.

As the shadow Health Secretary knows, we have been preparing for years. I was pleased with his acknowledgment that the containment measures that we have worked to put in place have had an effect. That in itself has given us more time to improve our preparedness for the spread of the disease. He said that we should maintain the containment strategy, and I should like to confirm that that is our intention. Nothing is changed by the WHO's declaration; we continue to follow the plans that we have laid out. However, obviously it is important to keep that under review. There will come a point when we have to move from the containment to the mitigation phase, as he acknowledged, but we are not there yet. We keep the matter under review, and we would update the House at such a point.

The Civil Contingencies Committee will consider the matter next week, including what the trigger points might be for moving from the containment phase to a mitigation phase, and what arrangements are needed to ensure successful distribution and treatment in that phase. Those are matters that we will consider next week with colleagues from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Of course we will update the shadow Health Secretary and the House when we have more information to give. On the decision taken this week about flexibility, I should just say that it is important to allow flexibility

to the experts on the ground where clusters have developed. That was very much the message from Scotland. We agreed to that flexibility this week, and we think it is the sensible thing to have done in the circumstances.

The shadow Health Secretary asked me about the work of Professor Neil Ferguson and, in particular, the surveillance of young people in hospitals. I want to reassure him that we recognise the importance of that. As he will know, Professor Ferguson is on the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts, or SAGE. Obviously, his advice is being fed in directly to us on matters such as the one we are discussing. The hon. Gentleman also asked about restricting the use of antivirals to close contacts. I think he asked that question in the context of the mitigation phase of the spread of the disease. I want to assure him that that is precisely the kind of thing the committee will consider next week. The balance has to be struck between a flexible response that is practical for health professionals, including public health professionals on the ground, and taking sensible and precautionary steps to prevent the spread of the disease. But we think the important thing is to give public health professionals the flexibility that they need on the ground to make those judgments. We will consider the matter in more detail next week and I will update the hon. Gentleman at that point.

The shadow Health Secretary asked about the national pandemic flu service. As I indicated in my statement, that will be up and running by the autumn. We have put in place interim services to give the public the information that they need. We have well developed plans for such a service which, as I said, will be in place by the autumn, and it will be able to deal with the demand, as necessary.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that there was some uncertainty and that PCTs did not know where collection points were. May I assure him that work is continuing to refine plans to set up the collection points, should they be necessary? Ian Dalton, director of NHS Flu Resilience, has worked in close partnership with PCTs on this. The hon. Gentleman also asked about the role of pharmacists. Again, that is an issue we will consider next week, and I will update him on that.

It is important for the public who are listening to this debate not to get a sense that there is about to be a widespread plan for school closures. I am sure the shadow Health Secretary would agree that it is business as usual and that life must go on. Obviously there may be circumstances in which the HPA considers it necessary to require or advise school closures because that may help with local containment of the disease. It is properly a decision taken at a local level on the advice of the HPA, but at all times it is the head teacher and the board of governors of any school who should listen to that advice and take the necessary action. However, it is important to keep the issue in proportion and avoid overreaction.

The hon. Gentleman's two final points were about critical care capacity and other measures in the national health service to deal with any expected pressure on NHS services as we work our way through. I want to assure him that I had a conversation with David Nicholson, the chief executive of the NHS, very soon after coming into office, in order to be assured that and understand how the NHS is ready to cope. It is important to say that the NHS has been preparing for this moment for a long time, and it was an important part of the operating framework which was sent out to the NHS last year. The plans are in place and we will ensure that the capacity is in place where it is needed. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point.

Lastly, of course we need to work through the WHO to ensure that we assist developing countries to manage the spread of the disease. I mentioned the £6 million that we have allocated for this purpose. The hon. Gentleman was right to mention southern Africa and the obligations that we have to help across the developing world. We take those incredibly seriously, and we will update the House as we have more information on precisely what practical steps we will take to make that happen.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for making the statement today. In the context of the World Health Organisation decision to raise the alert status, it was important that the House be made aware of the Government's position. I raised the issue of a pandemic and our preparations for it in a debate five or six years ago, at which time we were inadequately prepared. Enormous progress has since been made, and I give credit to the Government for their response to the current situation.

Given that the Government have, I think, been acting appropriately, does the Secretary of State share my concern that there might still be a lack of public understanding of some of the consequences? The media have generally been helpful, but there were elements of alarmist reporting in the early stages and, more recently, perhaps of complacency. The most important thing that the Secretary of State has to do is to increase public understanding of what is an appropriate response. He mentioned the closure of schools. That is often an important component of the response, particularly in terms of containment, because it removes a potent incubator population from the local community rather than any particular threat to the children at the school.

Does the Secretary of State foresee any difficulties if and when he feels it appropriate to move from the strategy of containment to the strategy of mitigation? Questions will inevitably be asked—"Why are we no longer being given Tamiflu when, last week, that was the response?" He needs to think through how he gets that information across. He must be clear about the level of prophylaxis and the distribution of antivirals if we move to a mitigation stage.

For instance, are we still going to concentrate on health care professionals in the wider sense—all those who work in close proximity to patients? I speak as a former optician. I realise that I would be likely to be in some danger of spreading the disease, were I working in close proximity to the face of someone who was affected.

What is the Secretary of State's epidemiological assessment for the UK? Is he expecting a rapid increase over the coming weeks, or that when we reach the period for seasonal flu outbreaks in the autumn, we are likely to see a rapid escalation in the incidence of community infection in this country? In that context, are there any dangers inherent in the combination of swine flu and seasonal flu? How will the professionals know how to respond appropriately? Will they be aware which immunisation they should give, for instance, and will they be aware of the circumstances in which they should give a double immunisation, if appropriate?

[Mr. David Heath]

Lastly, there was a reference in the statement to using clinical diagnosis to a greater extent, rather than laboratory testing. That is, of course, sensible but it raises questions about getting an accurate picture of the levels of infection. Is any differential diagnosis now available between swine flu and seasonal flu?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I repeat what I said earlier. We are interrupting private Members'-business.

Andy Burnham: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his foresight in bringing the issue to the House all those years ago. I mean that genuinely. It was important that colleagues with a scientific background and understanding of these matters raised public awareness and the public debate, and I am grateful for his acceptance that the Department for Health, the Health Protection Agency and others responded and significantly upped their game. As a former Health Minister coming back, I know that the subject occupied a great deal of my time two years ago, so I can assure him that the importance of the issue was internalised a long time ago.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the media. Perhaps I can do something that not many Members of the House have felt inclined to do for some time, and thank colleagues in the media for the balanced, fair and accurate way in which they have put over to the public information about the outbreak. That has characterised the vast majority of the media coverage so far. All of us, in all parts of the House, want that to continue through the rest of the year. It is important that we give a clear message to the public that things carry as normal.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the move from containment to mitigation and the issues that might arise about public messaging. I understand his point. Along the trajectory of this outbreak, there will be points where careful thought will have to be given to public messaging. Of course, there is a balance to be struck between the practicality on the ground for health staff carrying out the strategy, and the successful containment of the disease. The clear consensus of the committee this week was that we should give that flexibility to the Health Protection Agency.

The hon. Gentleman says that people might draw a distinction based on whether they can get an antiviral in one part of the country but not another. It is important to point out that there are dangers in over-prescribing and in giving medication to healthy people. That also has to be a consideration as we try to get the balance right.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to speculate on the projection of the disease, but it is important that I do not get into what can only be speculation at this stage. Obviously, there are scenarios for the development of the condition, which could take different paths, one of which he mentioned. There are also other potential scenarios. I assure him that the relevant scientific advice is being given to the committee. We need to plan for all scenarios, and that is what we will continue to do. The strategy has been described as "hope for the best, plan for the worst". We will continue to plan for the worst at all times and make sure that robust plans are in place. I assure the hon. Gentleman on that point.

What the hon. Gentleman said about clinical diagnosis rather than lab testing was very much in tune with what I said earlier about flexibility for health staff. That is a sensible and practical step to take at this moment. At all times, we want to preserve an accurate picture of how the disease is spreading in the country. We have plans in place to ensure that.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask hon. Members to ask just one single, concise question. If responses are brief, all Members present might be successful in catching my eye. I am ever-mindful that we have interrupted private Members' business.

Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North) (Lab): Across Whitehall and in many parts of the economy a great deal of planning has taken place because of fears of an outbreak of avian flu. I thank the Secretary of State for his calm and well informed statement and I am grateful to his Opposition counterparts for their approach. Will the Secretary of State assure the House, as I expect he can, that what we learn from swine flu will be fed into the longer-term planning for a more serious outbreak of avian flu, which we still expect to happen one day?

Andy Burnham: I thank my right hon. Friend for his important question. The information that we are gathering now is important not only for the immediate challenge that we face but, more generally, in preparing the country for any challenges in the future. That is why we have to strike a balance between practicality on the ground and accuracy. That takes me to the point raised by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). There is some discussion about the hospitalisation rate for the condition. The figure given by the World Health Organisation is 7.5 per cent., but it could be higher because of under-reporting in other parts of the world. It is important that at all times we try to get as accurate a picture as possible, not only to help in the here and now but to leave information that will be useful to future generations in dealing with any similar or worse conditions.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his promotion to the top of the greasy pole at the Department of Health. I warn him, however, that if his party changes leader in October, his tenure might turn out to have been short.

Sadly, the Secretary of State has said nothing today about travel, although most of the country are thinking about going away, including many people in Hinckley, Burbage and Market Bosworth in my Leicestershire constituency. What advice is he giving? So far, we have had only two cases in Leicestershire, but there is real concern. Finally, is he trying to reach young people through YouTube and Facebook?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I said that hon. Members should ask only a single question.

Andy Burnham: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's congratulations and I look forward to discussing complementary therapies with him at great length in the coming weeks.

The advice on travel has been clear throughout: there are no border closures and no restrictions on travel. The World Health Organisation reiterated that yesterday; I did not reiterate it again because I did not want to imply that there might be a problem. There is not a problem; there are no restrictions on travel at all.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): I understand that the Health Protection Agency, whose headquarters are based in my constituency, is encouraging the testing of people who have flu-like systems but have not travelled to one of the high-risk countries. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that all primary care trusts in London are able to run the required algorithm and that GPs have sufficient swab-taking supplies in their practices? Barnet, my PCT, has that facility. Its area has had seven cases; the first case in Barnet occurred in my constituency. It is important that all PCTs should be able to run that algorithm.

Andy Burnham: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance and I will write to him with further details on that point.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State consider preparing for to issue of a written statement on Monday? It could answer some of the detailed questions to which I am not sure the House has heard the answers this morning. What is the telephone number, either now or then, that someone should ring if they believe that someone in their household might have one of these respiratory conditions?

Andy Burnham: I would grateful if the hon. Gentleman said what he has not heard that he wants to hear. I answered the shadow Health Secretary's questions. If the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) want answers to specific questions, I would be grateful if he submitted them to me today in writing. I shall make sure that he gets an immediate response. The swine flu information line is 08001513513.

Emily Thornberry (Islington, South and Finsbury) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new post. As he is new to it, he might not know that one of the early outbreaks of swine flu took place in Finsbury in my constituency, when a young Australian man came back from Mexico. However, the outbreak has been contained because of that man's responsible behaviour and the prompt action of the local medical staff. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking them for their prompt and appropriate behaviour?

Andy Burnham: The most admirable thing about our national health service is how, at moments such as this, committed people up and down the country move into action and work hard to protect the public. That is a great thing. The shadow Health Secretary was right to raise that point; we would all wish to thank those people. We will be calling on them in the coming months, but as always they will be there for us and up to the task.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) (Con): If there is a large increase in the number of people infected by swine flu, as we seem now to be anticipating, the national flu pandemic service will be the only means of distributing antiviral drugs. Why is that service not already up and running, as was intended? What has gone wrong with the BT contract? Will the Secretary of State give a clear explanation? What does he mean by "the autumn"?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I repeat that I have asked for a single question from Members.

Andy Burnham: We have put in hand plans for a national service that can deal effectively with the mitigation phase of the condition, as and when it is reached. A detailed business case for the service has been prepared. That, of course, has to be tested to ensure that it delivers proper value for money and that the system being developed does the job that we want it to do. That work is now well in hand, and as I said in my statement, the service will be up and running by the autumn.

Mr. Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): It has been suggested that widespread prophylactic use of antivirals could lead to the development of resistance to those antivirals in the virus itself. Is that factor being taken into consideration in planning the use of antivirals?

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. That is a consideration. The decision taken this week on restricting the use of antivirals prophylactically is mainly because of the practicalities of doing it for health staff. However, he makes the important point that overuse of medicines among the healthy population is never sensible.

Alistair Burt (North-East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in coming to the House so promptly after yesterday's statement by the WHO—perhaps that will spread like a contagion among his colleagues, so that they too make rapid statements. Are any special measures being taken for those who have a lot of contact with people coming in from overseas, such as those who work at Luton airport, or those in my constituency at Yarl's Wood, who deal so promptly with a lot of asylum seekers coming into and out of detention?

Andy Burnham: I do not believe that any particular measures are being taken for immigration staff at the moment; I will seek to get the hon. Gentleman a fuller explanation of why that is the case.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Secretary of State has now admitted that he cannot prevent a widespread outbreak of swine flu. Why is it not better to have that widespread outbreak in the summer rather than putting it off until the winter?

Andy Burnham: My family love me, but there is a limit to what I can do, four days into the job. I am doing my best, as is everybody else, to ensure that the country is prepared. It makes sense to contain the condition as much as possible to give us time to put the necessary systems in place on the ground to take the country through this particular moment. *[Interruption.]* I am still slightly taken aback by the hon. Gentleman's question.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Secretary of State only touched on the impact of school closures and said that that will be a local decision. However, many people

[Philip Davies]

will be worried about the possible effect of school closures on parents and the knock-on effects on businesses. What assessment have the Government made of that possibility, and what discussions has he had about it with other Government Departments?

Andy Burnham: Obviously, we are working closely with other Government Departments to get our advice right on this point. School closures contjnue to be discussed by the civil contingencies committee, and we will update the hon. Gentleman and the House as necessary. Although more serious in a minority of cases, it is important to reiterate that in the vast majority of cases this has been a mild condition, and people have made a very speedy and full recovery. It will be important not to raise heightened concern about widespread school closures. Where they are necessary to prevent the spread of the disease within a particular area, let us leave that to the professionals and the experts. If they wish to give advice to school governors and head teachers, that is how these things should properly be done. It is not necessary at this stage to have a national policy on school closures, or whatever the hon. Gentleman seems to be pointing towards. Let us deal with this calmly as we go along, but at all times taking the steps advised by the experts.

Mr. Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I point out that Front Benchers took 31 minutes to make their opening statements and ask questions, so you inevitably had to curtail the few Back Benchers who are present in our questions? I understand that, but will you and Mr. Speaker look into whether Front-Bench contributions should be formally time limited?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can inform the hon. Gentleman that they are time limited, for that very reason, and that is why I intervened. That is even more important today, because it is a day for Back Benchers to bring their Bills before the House.

Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies and Credit Unions Bill

Proceedings resumed.

11.43 am

Mr. Timms: As we have heard, the proposals in the Bill are a direct result of Treasury consultation on the review of co-operative and credit union legislation in Great Britain, which was carried out in December 2007. The responses identified areas in the legislation for co-operatives and credit unions that would benefit from an update. We have held extensive discussions in the Treasury with the sector and key stakeholders, and we are taking forward the majority of the reforms using a legislative reform order, which I hope will be laid before the House before too long. The Bill complements the work that the Government are doing and deals with issues that have not been included in the LRO but have been widely sought by the sector. The sector and its supporters certainly wholeheartedly support the Bill promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Malcolm Wicks).

The Bill provides for a change of name for relevant institutions, and specifically that societies registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965 should be registered as co-operative societies or community benefit societies. Respondents to the consultation made a powerful case that the industrial and provident society name sounds somewhat outmoded and constrains the development of the sector. The Government agree that a name change would help modernise the sector and attract a new range of members, so we fully support it. However, my right hon. Friend is right that a simple renaming is not enough, and we also have to change the IPS name throughout the relevant legislation.

Applying the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 to officers of industrial and provident societies as it applies to companies, building societies and friendly societies will be useful, too. Clause 3 is necessary, as it will go a long way towards improving corporate governance standards by providing for industrial and provident societies to be subject to closer scrutiny by their registrar, the Financial Services Authority. The Bill gives the FSA new powers of investigation to enhance its scrutiny role.

The benefits of that increased scrutiny are twofold. First, enhanced corporate governance standards will give societies added credibility, which is particularly important in the current circumstances of the worldwide economic and financial sector crisis. Secondly, it will provide extra assurance and protection to societies' members and to the statutory authorities.

It is equally important to ensure that powers are available to regulate the corporate body, as well as the individuals who control it. I therefore welcome the aspects of my right hon. Friend's Bill that will help to create a level playing field by enabling the striking off and dissolution of defunct societies by the registrar and the application of company law in the investigation of companies. Importantly, it will also make it possible to apply to societies company law on company names, including directing a society to change its name if it is similar to other names or if the society has provided misleading information to register a particular name. At the moment there is no clear sanction for businesses

operating under the guise of a co-operative, or with the word "co-operative" included in their full corporate name. Helpfully, the Bill will remedy that anomaly.

Peter Bottomley: Again, the Minister may or may not know the answer to this question off the cuff, and I do not mind getting a letter later. Will that power apply retrospectively if a company already has the word "co-operative" in its title and it is challenged as being misleading?

Mr. Timms: I believe that the answer about retrospection in the way that the hon. Gentleman defines it is yes, but I will ensure that that point is covered in the response that I promised him earlier.

On clause 5, credit unions share a number of similarities with building societies, although they are on a smaller scale. Credit union membership has expanded significantly, and we need to ensure that the protections offered to members keep pace with the expansion of the sector. The Government consider that the best way of reconciling regulatory oversight with credit unions' expanding membership and operations would be to bring it into line with building society law, which is tailored to deal with issues specific to institutions that accept deposits. For example, we should allow credit union members a statutory right to vote by proxy and require institutions to provide a summary financial statement to members and depositors. In fact, the Bill will allow any provisions of building society legislation that are deemed appropriate to be mirrored for credit unions. I should give the reassurance that the Government would consult fully on any application of building society law to credit unions before bringing it into effect.

The Bill extends to Great Britain only, and excludes Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. It would not be right to interfere with the separate regime governing similar institutions in Northern Ireland, although there is a limited power in the Bill to make consequential amendments to Northern Ireland statute if appropriate.

The contributions to this morning's debate have reflected the affection and esteem in which Members throughout the House hold the mutual sector, and I am pleased to reaffirm the Government's wholehearted support for my right hon. Friend's Bill.

11.49 am

Malcolm Wicks: We have had a good, essential and therefore encouraging debate on the Bill, although it involved an outbreak of flu. However, I understand the need for the interruption.

I thank Treasury Ministers and officials for their great help in planning the Bill and my presentation of it. I especially thank my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary for his speech today and his support for the measure.

I thank the Co-operative party for its support, through research and intelligence, for my presentation. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said that she had not been able to join the Co-operative party. There is the old joke about the Labour party being full up, although I am bound to say that I do not think that that is the case at the moment. However, I have a feeling that a membership form will be winging its way to my hon. Friend so that she can remedy that one defect in her political personality.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, South and Finsbury on her speech. She represents an important and historic part of London, which my father, Arthur Wicks, represented for more than 30 years on the London county council and the Greater London council. I therefore watch her carefully and she is doing well.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), for his encouraging words. We usually discuss water mills and their potential for microgeneration, and it was good to talk about other matters on this occasion. The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) spoke encouragingly about the Bill, for which I thank him. I also thank the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Hurd), for his remarks.

I am a great believer in the private Member's Bill tradition. I had the opportunity in 1995 to introduce the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act. I know that Madam Deputy Speaker has an interest in that, and she and I worked together on it. I managed to introduce that Act under a Conservative Government, thanks not least to Virginia Bottomley, who was then Secretary of State for Health and who encouraged me.

I thought that if I could introduce a Back-Bench Bill under a Conservative Government, surely one day I could convince my Government to support a private Member's Bill that I promoted. I cheated slightly by adopting a Government measure, because I knew it might be more difficult under Labour than under the Conservatives to get a Bill on the statute book. However, I am pleased that we have consensus on the measure; we will have to wait and see what the upper House makes of it.

The private Member's Bill tradition is important. As I implied at the beginning of the debate, it is so important that I think we can approach the task mid-week in a slightly more adult and serious way than sometimes occurs on a Friday morning, when people make hay with often significant measures.

I ask the House to support Third Reading of this important Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Crown Employment (Nationality) Bill

Second Reading

The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household (Mr. John Spellar): I have it in command from Her Majesty the Queen to acquaint the House that Her Majesty, having been informed of the purport of the Bill, has consented to place her prerogative and interest, so far as they are affected by the Bill, at the disposal of Parliament for the purposes of the Bill.

11.54 am

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is not my second time but my seventh attempt to introduce the Bill. Twice—once a couple of years ago and once last year—I got as far as Report, so I hope to make a little more progress this time. The Bill was originally a Government handout measure, but it seems to have become my own work. I am persistent about it because the genuine problems that it seeks to address remain.

The purpose of the Bill is to remove the restrictions placed on the employment of non-UK nationals in civil capacities under the Crown. In place of the current system, the Bill would open up all civil employment under the Crown to applicants of any nationality, apart from such positions as would be rightly restricted to UK nationals—about 5 per cent. under rules made by the Minister responsible for the Department concerned.

Before looking at the detail, let me make it clear that the Bill does not deal with asylum, immigration or work permits, and does not affect the requirements for non-UK nationals to get leave to remain and permission to work in the UK. This is the Bill's seventh edition and, as it has gone on, various changes have been incorporated to reflect concerns that have been raised at its previous Committee and Report stages. It must now therefore be nearing a degree of perfection.

The rules restricting the employment of foreign nationals by the Crown go back more than 200 years. The Act of Settlement of 1700 provides that

"no person born out of the Kingdoms of England, Scotland, or Ireland, or the dominions thereunto belonging...shall be capable...to enjoy any office or place of trust, either civil or military".

That prohibition has been amended over the years, and does not apply to Commonwealth citizens, citizens of Ireland or British protected persons employed in a civil capacity. Section 6 of the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919 provides that

"no alien shall be appointed to any office or place in the Civil Service of the State."

"Alien" is now defined in section 51(4) of the British Nationality Act 1981 as a person who is neither a Commonwealth citizen nor a British protected person, nor a citizen of the Republic of Ireland.

During the second world war, defence regulations permitted the temporary employment of aliens, if no suitable British subjects were available. That was replaced by the Aliens' Employment Act 1955, under which the prohibitions were relaxed so that aliens could be employed if they were either appointed in a country outside the UK, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man in a capacity appearing to the Minister to be appropriate for aliens, or employed in accordance with a certificate issued by a Minister with the consent of the Minister for the civil service. In that connection, either there must be no suitably qualified UK nationals available to do the work, or the alien must possess exceptional qualifications or experience to do the job. Certificates last for five years and must then be renewed.

In 2006-07, only 66 people were employed under the certificates, 37 of whom were in the Ministry of Defence. That compares with 67 in 2005-06, and 57 in 2003-04. A few weeks ago, I tabled some parliamentary questions requesting up-to-date statistics, but those questions have not yet been answered. Perhaps when the Minister responds to the debate she will be able to give us those figures if she has them. If not, perhaps she will tell me when I might get those answers.

The European Communities (Employment in the Civil Service) Order 1991 amended the 1955 Act so as to allow nationals of member states of the European Community, and their spouses and certain children, to take up civil employment under the Crown, apart from "public service" posts within the meaning of the European Community treaty. The rights of nationals of member states of the European Community were extended to nationals of member states of the European economic area by section 2(1) of the European Economic Area Act 1993.

Against the background of a possible legal challenge to the European Court of Justice, further changes were made in 1996, to put Irish and Commonwealth citizens on the same footing as all other non-UK EC nationals. In that year, an amendment to the civil service management code was made to restrict Commonwealth and Irish nationals from being employed in posts reserved for UK nationals.

The most recent change was the European Communities (Employment in the Civil Service) Order 2007. That in large part gave effect to the St. Andrews agreement of October 2006. The Northern Ireland civil service was disproportionately affected by the prohibition of Irish nationals applying for reserved posts; in the Province, they accounted for 25 per cent. of the civil service. In annexe B to the agreement, there was a commitment to

"bring forward separate legislation before the end of 2006 to reform entry requirements to ensure access for EU nationals to posts in the Civil Service."

The 2007 order amended the Aliens' Employment Act 1995, to define more clearly and restrictively the categories of posts that could be reserved, reducing them to such areas as security and intelligence, defence, the diplomatic service, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, border control and immigration, and that sort of thing. The result of the order was to open up about a further 70,000 posts to Commonwealth, Irish and EEA nationals—in addition to UK nationals, of course—through the reduction in the number of reserved posts, reducing the total number of reserved posts to about 5 per cent., or about 27,000 jobs altogether.

However, the same basic rules still apply. The order has no effect on Commonwealth, Irish or EEA nationals relating to public service reserved posts or on aliens for any post in the absence of a certificate under the 1955 Act, or on the alien spouse of a UK national—but not of an EEA national—who also remains ineligible for appointment to the civil service. The effect of the rules

is that foreign nationals may be employed abroad in any civil post under the Crown, including in the diplomatic service if the Minister considers it appropriate.

As regards civil employment under the Crown within the UK, however, Commonwealth citizens, British protected persons and nationals of member states of the European economic area may be employed in posts that are not "public service" reserved, but nationals of all other countries may be employed in UK non-reserved posts only if one of the very rarely issued exemption certificates is in force. Thus, 95 per cent. of civil service posts in the UK are available to Commonwealth, Irish or EEA nationals and the remaining 5 per cent., requiring special allegiance for public service posts, are entirely reserved for UK nationals, while other nationals are pretty well entirely excluded, even if there is no good operational reason for that. Only posts that are operationally necessary are now reserved within the definition based on the EC treaty.

Attempts to define public service posts must follow EC case law and are subject to the judgments of the European Court of Justice. As a matter of UK law, however, EU nationals may now be admitted to civil service posts, but they cannot be admitted to ones that the European Court regards as employment "in the public service". Although the European Court interprets employment in the public service narrowly, it has nevertheless taken the view in the past that officials concerned, for example, in the collection of taxes are employed "in the public service".

The result was that, as a matter of UK law, a national of an EU member state cannot generally be employed in Revenue and Customs—because such a post constituted employment "in the public service" within the meaning of article 39(4) of the EC treaty, so the exception from the 1919 Act did not apply—and a criminal offence is committed if he is so employed. Revenue and Customs employment is now generally permitted, because of the effect of the new order.

I hope that Members are following the argument so far. What we have seen is basically a plethora of interacting and interchanging laws, regulations, rules, treaties and so forth, making it incredibly complicated to work out exactly what is what. My Bill will simplify all that lot, sweep away the complex spider's web that people have to negotiate and produce some simple and straightforward rules.

To summarise, the net effect of the complicated web of law is that it is a criminal offence, even if done by mistake, to employ a non-Irish EEA national in a "public service" reserved post or any alien in any civil service post at all, apart from a tiny number of certificated exemptions. Although it is legal under the freedom of movement provisions to employ in a non-reserved post the alien spouse of an EEA national living in the UK, it rather bizarrely remains a criminal offence to employ the alien spouse of a UK national without an exemption certificate. It is all very legalistic and technical, so let me further illustrate the anomalies by example.

As I have said, the Bill does not change the rules on asylum and immigration in any way. In my constituency as in many others, there are long-standing communities—from Iran and Iraq, for example, and more recently from Afghanistan—often comprising highly skilled professionals. Some were senior public servants in their home countries, but became refuges, fleeing persecution and dictatorship many years ago. They and their children, who may know no other country, are entirely banned from Government posts. They have a lot to offer and experience of working in our civil service would also stand them and their home countries in good stead if they ultimately wanted to return.

In Hendon, we also have large Israeli, Chinese and Japanese communities and UK citizens married to people of those nationalities. Assuming that they retained their own citizenship, these Israeli, Chinese and Japanese people, even though married to UK nationals, would be barred from jobs in the new Business Department, for example, where their language skills and knowledge of their home countries would be invaluable in promoting UK exports. However, if they were living in the UK and married a French or German rather than a British person, they would not be so barred and would be allowed to take up such positions under the freedom of movement provisions. It is bizarre that the spouse of a UK national is barred from working for the UK civil service, whereas the spouse of a French or German national is not.

The notorious extreme fundamentalist, Abu Hamza, has UK nationality—at least until the Home Secretary's efforts to remove his nationality come to fruition—and could, in theory, be employed in any civil service post, although I doubt he would want to apply or stand much chance of passing the interview as he is now in prison. However, the American widow of a British 11 September victim will be entirely excluded from Government employment. How bizarre an effect of the present rules is that?

As is so often the case, the police service is ahead of the game. I first raised this nationality anomaly in the context of the police regulations years ago, and I am pleased to say that it was dealt with by the Police Reform Act 2002. Subject to proper immigration status, competence in English and certain reservations relating to sensitive posts, nationality is no longer a barrier to joining the police.

In our country, some 780,000 residents of working age are not United Kingdom, Commonwealth or EEA nationals, and are thus excluded entirely. In London, a diverse world city, 330,000 people—7 per cent. of the working-age population—are entirely excluded not just from the higher echelons of the civil service, but even from applying for the most junior social security clerk's job in the Department for Work and Pensions. It is no wonder that we sometimes have difficulty in filling civil service jobs in the capital when such a high proportion of my fellow Londoners are entirely out of the equation.

My Bill tackles these bizarre and discriminatory anomalies by sweeping away the complex interlocking legislation and replacing it with a simple amendment to the Act of Settlement so as not to prohibit the employment of any person in any civil capacity under the Crown, while at the same time empowering the Minister to make rules in respect of nationality requirements for certain categories of posts that it is clearly necessary, and in the national interest, to reserve for UK nationals.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have heard most of these arguments several times before, and indeed have advanced similar arguments myself. I wonder whether he has yet found an answer to another conundrum which I threw

[Mr. David Heath]

at him back in 2007. What happens when a Commonwealth citizen who, as he says, is entitled to be employed by the Crown, is so employed and his country then secedes or is suspended from membership of the Commonwealth? Must that person then resign his post?

Mr. Dismore: I think my answer would be no, because the person's country had been a member of the Commonwealth at the time of his employment. It could be argued that the contract of employment would be frustrated, but I think that the matter would be approached sensibly, on the basis of the rules as they applied when the person was employed. If the person was fit to work and suitable for appointment at the time when he was employed, the existing position would continue. The person in question would still be the same person even if his country had been suspended from the Commonwealth, like Zimbabwe.

When I embarked on this marathon, it was thought that about 10 per cent. of the total number of posts should be reserved. It is now estimated that only about 5 per cent. of civil service posts—27,000—need be reserved. It is expected that the Bill would open up the remaining 95 per cent. of posts to selection on merit regardless of nationality, enabling us to build a civil service reflecting the diversity of the society that it serves.

Over the years, support for my proposals has grown. In their evidence to the Public Administration Committee, the civil service trade unions said:

"For the record we should state that the present Civil Service Nationality Rules are blatantly discriminatory against people from the Irish Republic and the Commonwealth. This is not a situation which reflects well on the Government or the Civil Service and completely flies in the face of efforts to develop a diverse Civil Service which represents the whole community it serves and one which endeavours to provide equality of opportunity to all its staff."

Several years ago, the Public Administration Committee said:

"This would be a much-needed reform and one that has long been called for",

and that it was

"to be welcomed and such provisions should be included in primary legislation to be introduced when Parliamentary time allows."

I therefore hope that the Bill will now be able to make progress. Obviously it would also raise issues in the context of clause 184(5) of the Equality Bill, which refers to schedule 22.

Some years ago, when the Opposition tabled a civil service Bill based on a Select Committee draft, they appeared to agree with my proposals, and I understand that they continue to endorse them as a sensible reform. Surely the time has now come for progress. Surely we can get rid of a raft of ancient legislation dating back 200 years and replace it with legislation that is modern and fit for the 21st century, so that the civil service can recruit the people who are best suited for the job and so that we can ensure that our rules deal with applicants in a genuinely non-discriminatory way.

12.9 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): There are certain rites and annual events of this House that mark the passing of the seasons, and one of them is the Second Reading of the Crown Employment (Nationality) Bill on behalf of the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore). I find it unbelievable that we are still discussing, in this groundhog day way, exactly the same Bill year after year, when it is perfectly obvious that its provisions are sensible. It makes a very minor change to the enactments that affect the civil service, and there is no adequate reason why the Government cannot accept it. They might wish to do so with amendment, but the principle behind it must, I am sure, be agreed on both sides of the House.

I and some other Members from both sides of the House have argued for a long time that we should have a civil service Bill. We have been repeatedly promised such a Bill, but it has never transpired. We have been told that its principal features will be subsumed within the Constitutional Renewal Bill, but we have not seen that yet, of course, and some of us have our doubts as to whether it will actually encompass the provisions of a draft civil service Bill, which we have discussed on previous occasions, which the Public Administration Committee has been involved in, and which so many Members have advocated.

Even in the absence of a more comprehensive piece of legislation, it does not seem to me to be beyond reason for the following absurd anomaly to be addressed. If a citizen of Mozambique—I always seem to use that country as my example in these cases, perhaps because it is the most recent member of the Commonwealth, but also perhaps because it has no historic links with the United Kingdom—can have employment, why cannot someone from Montana? Where is the logic in that anomaly in terms of the proper running of the civil service and the interests of the country? Of course some posts must be restricted, and the hon. Gentleman's Bill makes provision for that, but if it is right and proper that any citizen of a Commonwealth country or of the European Union, or any spouse of a citizen of the EU, can be employed in the civil service, why not extend that to others who do not come from those countries, but who are well qualified and who could, I am sure, provide the same level of loyalty to the Crown, if not by nationality then by contract? That is the crucial point.

I welcome the Minister to her new post. I hope she will set aside the attitude of her predecessors for seven years, or however long it has been—I am unsure on how many occasions this Bill has been brought forward—and welcome the Bill. Moreover, I hope she will welcome it with a determination to take it forward. If at the end of the day it is better for its provisions to be subsumed within the Constitutional Renewal Bill, and if we have that Bill and it makes progress in this parliamentary Session, so be it, but for heaven's sake let us get on with this. Let us get rid of these anomalies and make our legislation make sense—and please can we not have to sit through another Friday morning with exactly the same speeches being made on both sides of the House supporting exactly the same measure, because it really is not a sensible use of our time?

12.14 pm

Mr. Nick Hurd (Ruislip-Northwood) (Con): On this groundhog day, may I, too, start by congratulating the new Minister on her appointment? I am sure our future exchanges will be more focused on the role of government in unlocking the potential of the third sector to help

more people, but today we are rightly focused on what is a stubborn Bill, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), not least for his tenacity. I have always been grateful to him because he showed relative benevolence to my private Member's Bill, which became the Sustainable Communities Act 2007, although I suspect that that generosity had something to do with the fact that his own Bill was next on the Order Paper. I have always been grateful that he kept his assassin's dagger in its sheath that day and I wish him well with this Bill. I congratulate him on the speech that he delivered, but there is no surprise in that because he has delivered it enough times. I suspect that he could recite it in his sleep, and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) could probably do the same. We believe that the Bill deserves to receive a Second Reading.

Like the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, who speaks for the Liberals, Conservative Members regret that today we are looking at just one small corner of the painting and not at the wider canvas of the role and status of the civil service. We have consistently stated our view that this reform should be placed in the larger context of a civil service Act that defines the role of the civil servant in law. That has been promised since 1997 and is yet to be delivered. At a time when public confidence in the way in which we are governed is at such a low ebb, the case for such an Act grows even stronger. We now look to the Constitutional Renewal Bill to deliver it and we urge the Government to get on with it. I recognise the argument that private Members' Bills should be focused on relatively modest and concise objectives, and we accept that the principle of this Bill is right.

The law on who is eligible to work in the civil service is rooted in a different age and it is complex, it has been amended on many occasions and, unsurprisingly, it is a mess. It throws up plenty of anomalies, and those were described well by the hon. Member for Hendon. They must be irritating to work with and the provisions are no longer rooted in any logic. Foreign nationals can be employed by the Crown abroad, if that is considered appropriate, but in the UK non-reserved jobs are limited to Commonwealth citizens, British protected persons and nationals of European Union member states. In 2009, it makes no sense that someone from Nigeria can apply for a job in the civil service here, but someone from the United States cannot do so. In the past, the law might have been justified by concerns about securing allegiance to the Crown, but that justification evaporated with the relaxing of eligibility for members of the EU. In any case, the oath of loyalty to the Crown is now a question of contract, above all, and the Bill does nothing to change the right of Ministers to reserve sensitive posts for UK nationals.

There appears to be an opportunity cost to this muddle, because at a time when we want to be attracting the brightest and best to the civil service and we want our public servants genuinely to reflect modern Britain and its growing ethnic complexity, not least in London—I, too, am a Greater London MP, so I entirely endorse what the hon. Gentleman is saying in this context—it makes no sense to leave a group of people totalling 800,000, according to his numbers, outside the tent. All those people have a legitimate right to be here to make a contribution in appropriate roles. We think they should be given that chance and we are therefore happy for the Bill to be receive a Second Reading.

12.18 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Angela E. Smith): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on his continuing commitment to this Bill; I believe he said that this is his seventh attempt with this particular piece of legislation. I understand that the former Member for Wimbledon, Mr. Casale, also introduced this Bill, so it has a long and dignified history.

As I understand it, the Bill has sought in the past, and continues to seek, to do two things. First, it seeks to remove nationality restrictions applying to employment or the holding of office in a civil capacity under the Crown. Secondly, it seeks to empower a Minister of the Crown to make rules in respect of the nationality requirements of certain categories of posts. In effect then, the Bill would open up Crown employment, including in the civil service, in non-reserved posts to all individuals of any nationality who can live legally in the UK and have entitlement to work here. There would be no bypassing of the UK's immigration system.

I wish to go into a bit more depth about the Bill, but may I say at the outset that I think it contains considerable merit, although some issues will require further discussion? So although I am unable to give full support to the Bill today, I want it to progress to Committee, because that seems to be the appropriate place to discuss those issues and examine any concerns that may be raised. In the fine traditions of this House, that is the right and proper way to address such concerns. I cannot give it my full support, but it is appropriate that it should go to Committee for further discussion.

I shall set aside the effect of the Bill for the moment and consider the current nationality rules and framework, and who can currently be employed under its remit. Holders of an office in a civil capacity under the Crown include civil servants in Departments, including the devolved Administrations, the judiciary, the security and intelligence services, the royal household and civilian Army personnel. Within those two groups are two types of post—the reserved and the non-reserved. As we have heard from my hon. Friend, reserved posts are those that are seen, owing to their sensitive nature, as requiring special allegiance to the Crown and therefore reserved for UK nationals only.

Some posts are reserved as a matter of course—for example, all posts in the intelligence and security services are reserved, as are those in the diplomatic service and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, unless in the latter case the Minister decides otherwise. Certain other categories of post are also capable of being reserved for UK nationals, but only if the Minister responsible for the Department or agency considers that to be necessary. Examples of such posts include posts in the defence intelligence staff in the Ministry of Defence or those posts whose functions are concerned with access to intelligence information received directly or indirectly from the security intelligence services; access to other information that, if disclosed without authority or otherwise misused, might damage the interests of national security; or access to other information which, if disclosed without authority or otherwise misused, might be prejudicial to the interests of the UK or the safety of its citizens. Other such posts include those concerned with border control or decisions about immigration.

[Angela E. Smith]

If a post does not fall into one of the above categories, it cannot be reserved. This supports the deliberate intention to keep the posts as open as possible and to reserve as few as possible. My hon. Friend asked about some parliamentary questions that he had tabled. I can tell him that some 5 per cent. of posts in the civil service are currently reserved and the rest are available to all other qualifying nationals. Some 27,000 posts are reserved. As I am relatively new to this position, I have not seen the other questions that he mentioned, but I will ensure that he receives answers as soon as possible. He also asked how many alien certificates had been issued in 2008-09. The final figures are being collated, so they are not yet available, but they will be made available to him as soon as that happens. For 2007-08, the figures peaked at 80 through the year, although the final figure was 60. Those figures have not been finally confirmed, but when they have, they will be provided to my hon. Friend. I hope that that is helpful to him.

So which nationalities, under the rules, are eligible for employment in those remaining 95 per cent. of posts and who is precluded? The answer is that the rules do not specifically preclude any nationality from being considered for employment—individuals who apply for posts will be eligible in their own right or, potentially, employable through one of the available exceptions. As of right under the rules, the following countries or associations of countries are eligible for employment: the UK; the Republic of Ireland; the Commonwealth; the European economic area; and Switzerland and Turkey. Also, certain—not all—family members of EEA, Swiss and Turkish nationals are also eligible regardless of their nationality. UK nationals include citizens born in the UK; British citizens born abroad; British Overseas citizens; British Overseas Territories citizens; British Nationals (Overseas) British subjects; and those recognised as British citizens through naturalisation or registration.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) asked about Commonwealth citizens. A Commonwealth citizen is any person who has the status of a Commonwealth citizen under the British Nationality Act 1981, and the territories forming part of the Commonwealth are listed as part of that Act. That includes more than 70 countries and territories. His particular question was about what would happen if a country ceased to be a member. The response given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon pretty much headed in the right direction. The rules do not affect the rights of those who might be in employment whose countries are then suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth. When a nation is suspended, its nationals remain in employment if they are already employed or remain eligible for employment. That would change only if the nation concerned was formally excluded by the amendment of the Act. There would have to be a formal exclusion under the legislation; a suspension would not affect eligibility for employment.

Mr. Heath: Do I then understand that were a country to be excluded from the Commonwealth—or to exclude itself by secession—the terms would apply? That was the corollary of what she said, which was that it would not apply under suspension.

Angela E. Smith: Yes, that is the case. If the legislation changed and that country was no longer a member of the Commonwealth—if it had been formally excluded by amendment of the Act—its nationals would not then be eligible for employment.

The EEA comprises not only the member states of the EU, but, as hon. Members will be aware, the nations of the European Free Trade Association. That means that the Crown can draw on the talents of some 30-plus nations from that group alone. Also included is Switzerland, whose nationals have the same rights as EEA nationals.

That pool of talent is widened further to include Turkish nationals and certain family members of EEA, Swiss and Turkish nationals. Turkish nationals are eligible for Crown employment if they have been lawfully employed in the UK for four years in any job or for three years in the same occupation as the post that they wish to take up under the Crown. The family members of EEA nationals gain their rights in such circumstances as the EEA national has exercised their rights under the treaty establishing the European Community—in particular, the right to freedom of movement. As a result, those family members of EEA nationals, irrespective of their nationality, are eligible to take up employment in the member state where that national is employed.

That means that certain family members of EEA nationals employed in the UK would also be eligible to be employed in the UK and therefore to be employed in non-reserved posts in the civil service, even if they did not as individuals satisfy the civil service nationality rules. That was the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon was making.

The family members concerned are the spouse or civil partner of the EEA national, and the direct descendants of the EEA national or their spouse or civil partner, such as their children and grandchildren. Direct descendants qualify only if they are under the age of 21 or are dependants. Dependent direct relatives in the ascending line of the EEA national or their spouse or civil partner, such as their parents and grandparents, are also included.

Certain family members of Swiss nationals resident in the UK, who are not Swiss and would not otherwise satisfy the rules, have rights to reside and to take up employment in the member state where that national is employed. That means that family members of Swiss nationals employed in the UK would also be eligible to be employed in the UK and therefore to be employed in non-reserved posts in the civil service. My hon. Friend did say that this could get to be rather a technical argument, and I think that we are proving that point.

The family members concerned in this case are the spouse of the Swiss national, the direct descendants of the Swiss national—such as their children and grandchildren, as I have said—who are under the age of 21 or are dependants and their dependent relatives in the ascending line, such as grandparents and parents. In the case of a Swiss national who is a student, rights extend only to the spouse and any dependent children of the Swiss national. Those family members can work in the UK and are eligible for employment in non-reserved posts in the civil service.

Certain family members of Turkish nationals who qualify for employment in the civil service are also eligible for employment in the civil service. Family members of Turkish nationals are eligible for employment

in non-reserved civil service posts if they have been lawfully resident in the United Kingdom for three years or more.

The family members concerned are Turkish nationals' spouses and direct descendants of either the Turkish national or the spouse. Those descendants are children—including stepchildren—grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who are under the age of 21 or who are dependants. Also included are direct dependent relatives in the ascending line of a Turkish national or their spouse—that is, their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.

In order for the family member to be eligible for employment in the civil service, they must have lived in the UK with the qualifying Turkish national. There are also special rules that entitle children of qualifying Turkish nationals to take up jobs in the civil service if they have completed a course of vocational training in the UK. There is no length-of-residence requirement attached to that right. The Turkish national or the other parent of the child must have been legally employed in the United Kingdom for at least three years. After that fairly brief overview, I am sure the House will agree that the framework already allows for recruitment from a wide range of nations. I think it would also agree that there is some complexity in the rules.

It is worth considering where the framework came from, and how we got to this point. The statutory prohibition on the employment of aliens in a civil capacity under the Crown—including, but not only, in the civil service—stems from the Act of Settlement of 1700. That Act provides that

"no Person born out of the Kingdoms of England Scotland or Ireland or the Dominions thereunto belonging"

may

"enjoy any Office or Place of Trust either Civill or Military".

That provision was repealed in 1919—it took a few years—and replaced by the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919, which provides that

"no alien shall be appointed to any office or place in the Civil Service of the State."

My hon. Friend rightly feels some frustration at having proposed the measures in his Bill seven times in seven years; he would feel greater frustration if he had been trying to change things from 1700 to 1919.

An alien—I grant that that is not the most attractive of words to use to describe a non-UK national—is defined in the British Nationality Act 1981 as

"a person who is neither a"

British nor a

"Commonwealth citizen nor a British protected person nor a citizen of the Republic of Ireland."

The position with regard to the employment of aliens changed during the second world war. At the time, defence regulations permitted the temporary employment of aliens if no suitable British subjects were available. That situation was altered under the Aliens' Employment Act 1955, which provided that

"an alien may be employed in any civil capacity under the Crown",

either in posts outside the UK—an example would be locally engaged staff—or, exceptionally, in other circumstances under cover of an aliens certificate, signed by the responsible Minister. I shall say a bit more about the 1955 Act shortly. Following that Act, the European Communities (Employment in the Civil Service) Order 1991—Statutory Instrument 1991/1221—and the European Economic Area Act 1993 had the effect of opening up Crown employment to nationals of the European economic area, with the exception of "public service" posts, or, as we know them in the UK, reserved posts within the meaning of article 39(4) of the European Community treaty.

That was followed by the European Communities (Employment in the Civil Service) Order 2007, which came into force on 7 March 2007. It amended the 1955 Act and the 1991 order to specify in more detail the definition of reserved posts and to clarify eligibility to take up non-reserved posts in the civil service. The 2007 order sets out categories of posts that are either automatically reserved to UK nationals or can be reserved to UK nationals if the relevant Minister considers it necessary.

The Bill would remove the nationality restrictions by providing that section 3 of the Act of Settlement does not prohibit

"any person from being employed or holding office in a civil capacity under the Crown",

and by repealing section 6 of the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919, the whole of the 1955 Act, and the 1991 order.

I think we understand the point made by my hon. Friend when he says that in many cases the complexity of the legislation can make it difficult to ensure that the right rules have been applied. Is there merit in the changes he proposes? That is a matter for the House to decide and the Committee to consider.

I mentioned a moment ago that the spouse of an EEA national can be deemed eligible for Crown employment irrespective of their own nationality. The family members of EEA nationals gain their rights in circumstances where the EEA national has exercised their rights under the treaty of the European Community—in particular, the right to freedom of movement. My hon. Friend raised this specific point.

The interrelationship of EC and UK law has created what is commonly referred to in the civil service as the alien spouse anomaly, whereby a Chinese national married to a French national who was working in UK could be deemed eligible for civil service employment by extension of their spouse having exercised their freedom of movement rights. But if the same Chinese national were married to a UK national working in the UK, they would not be deemed eligible, thereby giving more rights to EEA nationals and their families than to UK nationals.

It is worth noting—this is where I have some disagreement with my hon. Friend's analysis, though he is essentially right in practice—that the consequence of the freedom of movement rights does not represent a complete bar on the spouses of UK nationals. UK nationals themselves may have gained their rights by exercising freedom of movement or are open to that, as any other EEA national is. If they have triggered those rights, their spouse may well be eligible for Crown employment, irrespective of their nationality. However, it is accepted that in reality an EEA national living and working in the UK is more likely to be able to show that they have engaged their freedom of movement rights than a UK national living in the UK.

[Angela E. Smith]

The Bill seeks to remove the anomaly. Beyond this, one could argue that the Bill represents a sensible tidying up of somewhat aged and complex legislation, removing an administrative layer from recruitment and putting the Crown and civil service on an equal footing with the rest of the UK. That is the considerable merit of the Bill. However, there are difficulties that need to be teased out in Committee, and that is why I cannot give the Bill my full support at present.

One of the questions that we should consider is whether there is at the moment a problem with the recruitment or retention of talent and which the Bill addresses, and whether it is helpful in that regard. The Crown, including the civil service, evolves like all other employers. It needs to be able to reflect a diverse society to understand and meet its needs. To do that, it must be able to draw on a range of talent and variety of individuals. The civil service would accept that the widest pool possible was to its benefit in getting the talent and the skills that it requires. The legislative framework as it stands allows recruitment from a wide range of nations so that the Crown and civil service are able to recruit the talent that they need, without affecting policies on national security and/or immigration.

The changes in the economic and working climate within which we should consider the Bill are brought into focus if we consider that during the Bill's presentation in 2007 my hon. Friend:

> "I have the honour to represent a constituency in London, which is a diverse city, but 330,000 people in London, or 7 per cent. of its working-age population, are entirely excluded, not just from the higher echelons of the civil service, but from even applying for the most junior social security clerk's job. It is no wonder that we have difficulty filling civil service jobs in the capital when so many of my fellow Londoners are entirely out of the equation." [*Official Report*, 29 June 2007; Vol. 460, c. 579.]

He made a similar point today.

The use of aliens certificates means that individuals are not barred per se from employment, even at the most junior levels. They can be employed at any level, in any city or town, when there is a need. That they are not suggests that there currently is not the need. What is more, and critical in illustrating the changing climate, is the fact that since my hon. Friend made his statement in 2007 about job opportunities in London, the efficiency and relocation programme undertaken by the civil service dictated that some 20,000 jobs were to be relocated out of London and the south-east by 2010.

In the recent Budget, the number of jobs to be relocated out of London and the south-east by 2010 was further increased to 24,000. So far, more than 17,000 jobs have been so relocated. Now some three quarters of civil service jobs are located outside London and the south-east. Alongside that, the civil service currently has a work force of 487,000 full-time equivalent civil servants. That is the lowest number since 1999. In the year ending March 2008, the turnover was 7.8 per cent., so there is evidence of a slowing down in the rate of departure in the current economic climate.

To put that in context, when the Bill was first introduced in 2001, the civil service had 39,230 entrants and 31,360 leavers, and a work force of more than 500,000. By 2008, that had fallen to 23,490 entrants and 41,050 leavers, and a work force of 487,000. Indeed, the number of entrants to the civil service is at its lowest level since the Bill was first introduced, whereas the number of leavers is proportionally at its highest.

In 2001, 39,000 people joined the civil service, against 31,000 people leaving, so 11 per cent. more joined than left. In 2002, 47,370 joined, against nearly 28,000 leaving, so 42 per cent. more joined than left. In 2003, well over 60,000 joined yet nearly 45,000 left, so 26 per cent. more joined the civil service than left. In 2004, 54,500 people joined the civil service, while not that many fewer—46,000—left, so 15 per cent. more joined than left. In 2005—another year in which my hon. Friend introduced his Bill—40,000 joined, against nearly 51,000 leaving, which gives a difference of 20 per cent. In 2006, 37,000 joined, with 42,000 leaving. In 2007, nearly 25,000 joined, against 36,000 leaving, which gives a 31 per cent. difference. In 2008, 23,000 joined the civil service and 41,000 left, which gives a difference of more than 43 per cent.

Of the vacancies available in the civil service, all departmental vacancies are initially advertised for a minimum of two weeks to staff at risk of redundancy, because we obviously want to maximise redeployment and minimise any possibility of compulsory redundancy. I am sure the House would accept that, particularly at this time, those are the actions of a good employer. They are, of course, also supported by the national trade union side, and form part of an agreement made in April 2008.

Coupled with that, the civil service, like any other big employer, has a policy of redeployment, within departments and across departmental boundaries, and promotions. That enables the service to utilise people's key skills, which Departments will have invested in, and retain key talent. That said, the civil service cannot be protectionist or keep all its posts for its own people. It recognises that external recruitment is essential at all levels to provide opportunities to jobseekers and bring in new talents, experiences and ideas. To that end, a large number of jobs at all levels are advertised in the external market each year, both in the press and in a number of other ways, but mainly through local jobcentres and on the civil service website.

The key is to have balance. External recruitment and internal moves allow new ideas to be brought in and job opportunities to be created, while ensuring a level of stability in organisations and—I emphasise this point—reducing the need to resort to compulsory redundancies. The civil service, as the largest employer under the heading of the Crown, has to strike that fine balance between finding efficiency savings and supporting the UK and its workers through the current economic downturn, and it has shown a determination and commitment to achieve this.

I spoke earlier about the relocation away from London and the south-east, and about the current position on recruitment. Relocations away from London are not the only issue, of course. As part of the efficiency and relocation programme, significant work force reductions have had to be faced and some 76,600 were achieved between July 2004 and March 2008. Further reductions continue to take place.

Despite that context of efficiency savings and relocation, the civil service is seeking to play its role in the current economic climate, and is actively recruiting to Jobcentre Plus to deal with the rise in registrations and to assist people back to work. It is right that that should be

done; if finding work becomes harder, we should do more to help, not less. The civil service has also committed fully to the success of local employment partnerships. As the House will know, LEPs aim to get priority group customers into work. They are a partnership between business and Jobcentre Plus and provide tailored support to prepare the unemployed for work. I am pleased to report that the civil service has committed to filling at least one in four of its administrative staff vacancies through LEPs.

The discussion on recruitment helps to illustrate the fact that there simply is not an endemic problem that repealing the existing legislation on nationality would solve. Whatever merits the Bill has, it would not automatically resolve the point at issue. With the exception of Jobcentre Plus, which is creating jobs for a specific reason—actively to assist the British economy towards recovery—recruitment is at a reasonably low level. Repealing the legislation at this time would have little practical effect in the current climate.

That is supported by the most recent findings of the Migration Advisory Committee, which recently published its first review of the shortage occupation lists for skilled workers coming to the UK from outside the EEA. In announcing the publication of its recommendations, Professor David Metcalf, the chair of the committee, said:

"The points-based system, including the shortage occupation list, has to operate for the benefit of United Kingdom workers, especially given the current economic climate. These latest recommendations take account of the impact of the worldwide recession on the United Kingdom. We have looked critically at the evidence regarding the occupations under review and made recommendations which balance the needs of the UK workforce against those of employers. It is important to note that some shortages of skilled labour will still exist in a recession. This can be where there is a long-term structural shortage of skilled workers, where workers provide key public services, or in areas such as culture where the United Kingdom needs to maintain global leadership."

If we consider the occupations on the list for tier 2 of the points-based system, we see that the terms "civil servant" and "Crown employer" do not appear. Terms that we might associate with professions in the civil service or in Crown employment—for example, "administrator", "policy official" or "project manager" do not appear on the list. It is reasonable to conclude that they do not appear because there is not a shortage in those areas.

Any roles within the civil service or under the Crown that may appear on the list are likely to be in more specialist or technical areas and would not, as a result, be widespread across the civil service. Situations such as a qualifying national not being available or specialist skills being needed would attract the use of the aliens certificate route. For example, "structural engineer" appears on the shortage occupation list and a structural engineer is currently employed in the civil service under cover of an aliens certificate.

You will be aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I have only recently undertaken this brief. One of the things that I have wanted from my officials is more detailed information on aliens certificates—how they are used and how many are used. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon has also been looking into that issue. I shall share the information that I have received with the House.

A criticism of the framework has often been that, although it provides for a wide-ranging group of nationalities to be deemed eligible for employment under the Crown, a significant number of nationalities and individuals are precluded. It is argued that that preclusion prevents as wide a pool of talent as possible from being chosen, denies the Crown the best available people and prevents a diverse work force from being created. That is not strictly the case. Where necessary, the current framework does allow individuals to be employed from outside the UK, the EEA, the Commonwealth, Switzerland and Turkey.

The Aliens' Employment Act 1955 allows for the employment of non-UK, non-eligible nationals under cover of what are known as aliens certificates. The circumstances in which an aliens certificate may be issued are set out in section 2 of the Act:

"a certificate may be issued under this section either in respect of employment of a specified alien in specified service, or in respect of the employment of aliens generally in specified service or in service of any specified class or description; but no such certificate shall be issued unless it appears to the responsible Minister, at the time of the issue of the certificate,

(a) in the case of a certificate in respect of the employment of a specified alien in a specified service, either that no suitably qualified person being a British subject is available for employment in that service or that the alien possesses exceptional qualifications or experience fitting him for such employment;

(b) in the case of any certificate, that suitably qualified persons being British subjects are not readily available, or available in sufficient numbers, for employment in the service, or class or description of service, specified in the certificate."

In brief, a certificate can cover the employment of a particular individual in a particular post or the employment of individuals generally in specific posts or in posts of a particular class or description. For the purposes of the civil service nationality rules, this is described as a certificate being able to be issued where

"there is no suitably qualified UK national available for employment in that post; or the alien possesses exceptional qualifications or experience for the post. Other certificates (including those covering the employment of aliens in posts of a particular class or description) may only be issued if suitably qualified UK nationals are not readily available, or available in sufficient numbers for employment in the post or class or description of the posts specified in the certificate."

Aliens certificates currently in force cover a diverse range of nationalities. It may be helpful if I provide the House with a breakdown of where individuals covered by the certificates come from. Fourteen certificates cover individuals from the USA. One individual is from Egypt, three are from China, one is from Iran, 61 are from Nepal, one is from Tunisia, one is from Chile, one is from Argentina, one is from Japan, one is from Sudan, one is from Ukraine, one is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one is from Colombia, one is from Brazil, one is from Venezuela, and one is from Thailand. The range of posts is equally widespread, from junior administrative grades to specialists in scientific fields—from individuals employed in Ministry of Defence barracks to specialist marine biologists and, as I said, a structural engineer.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon suggested, the use of aliens certificates has been criticised for being an overly onerous administrative process. It would therefore help the House if I explained how a Department goes about getting an aliens certificate. It is not that burdensome, but it is, as he said, an additional administrative layer of

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bureaucracy. For applications for a certificate on the grounds that no qualifying national is available, the Department concerned makes a business case to the Cabinet Office setting out certain details: confirmation that there are no restrictions on the candidate's taking up employment or that the Home Office has given the necessary clearance; confirmation that the post is non-reserved; confirmation that no qualifying national is available; details of the recruitment campaign, including when and where the post was advertised, the number of applications and the results of interviews; and a draft copy of the aliens certificate.

For applications on the grounds that the candidate brings specialist skills, experience or qualifications, the business case to the Cabinet Office should provide: confirmation that there are no restrictions on the candidate's taking up employment or that the Home Office has given the necessary clearance; confirmation that the post is non-reserved; details of the recruitment campaign, what is the specialist requirement of the post, and what specialist skills the candidate brings that others do not; and a draft copy of the aliens certificate. The Cabinet Office will then consider the case and, assuming that consent is granted, send the confirmation back to the Department with the certificate for signature by the Minister in that Department. Once signed, the certificate is returned to the Cabinet Office. Given the numbers involved, the processing of aliens certificates is not an overly onerous administrative task to place on Departments and agencies, so repealing the legislation and removing the need for the certificates would not solve a problem or create any significant efficiency savings.

I would not for one moment claim that the current system is perfect. It would be inappropriate to do so. My hon. Friend addressed the issue moderately by saying that the Bill would remove an administrative burden and tidy up legislation, but the current law allows a workable, pragmatic approach to recruitment.

UK, Commonwealth and European economic area citizens are available to the Crown, and the issuing of aliens certificates allows Departments, agencies and so on to widen their scope where necessary, perhaps when a post requires such specialist skills that the number of candidates is naturally limited, or if recruitment at a junior level is traditionally difficult due to the geographical location of the post, its salary, its low level or local unemployment. The pool of talent available to the civil service is therefore both wide and diverse.

It is reasonable to suggest that were there a shortage of eligible nationals available to take up posts or a lack of expertise in specialist posts, applications for the certificates would be growing in number. They are not, and I gave my hon. Friend the relevant figures earlier. At any one time there are approximately 60 to 80 certificates in force, in a civil service that currently has 487,000 employees. Indeed, in the financial year 2008-09, requests for applications fell by almost 20 per cent. In the current financial year to date, the number requested is three, compared with six in the same period in 2008-09.

I shall expand the discussion on the use of aliens certificates. It has been argued that the mechanism is difficult to use, which is why its use is minimal compared with the total number of civil service employees. In 2004, the late Eric Forth spoke about the Aliens' Employment Act 1955 in a debate on the earlier version of this Bill. He said:

> "It takes a rather sensible approach, which seems to have stood the test of time. As I understood it, the measure reverses the presumption, so that instead of opening our doors to anyone regardless of their nationality, it states that we would not wish automatically to allow people who have not chosen to express their loyalty or identity to this country by taking British nationality to work within our Government, but that we are prepared to consider...on a case by case basis those who may wish to be so employed and that, if they can satisfy us that their skills are relevant and that we need and would appreciate their services, we have a mechanism to allow them to do that work."—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2004; Vol. 421, c. 595.]

The current Bill is a somewhat negative interpretation of the purpose of the Act, which I suggest could be looked on in a much more positive light. It should be seen not as a vehicle to block non-UK nationals from gaining employment but as a mechanism that allows the employment of such individuals. It is a tool whose use is not discouraged, nor is the number of certificates that can be issued across the civil service limited. It is driven by need, and it does not appear that Departments are requesting a vast number of certificates. That suggests that they are not using the Act simply because they do not have an overwhelming need to do so, as they can currently recruit successfully.

Rather than argue that the civil service is bound by an Act that says, "You cannot be employed because you do not fit into nationality requirements", we should be far more positive and say, "We have an Act that says we can consider employing you, and where the circumstances are such that we need to do so, we will be very happy to."

To end my comments on aliens certificates on a positive note, I am pleased to say that the Cabinet Office has informed me that in the light of the Bill, it is looking to assist the users of the nationality rules by considering whether their drafting and presentation could be different. Perhaps the language could be updated or the presentation modernised, and they need to be user-friendly. Their complexity is an issue to consider.

I want to raise a couple more points on which we need to reflect and ask questions. I should like to address them also in Committee. One might argue that what we do with employment in our civil service is for us to determine in the best interests of the UK, but should we not also consider reciprocity? Are our rules that different from those of other nations? Should they be? The United States is a large user of aliens certificates. However, it seems that it would be no easier for a UK national to enter the US civil service than for a US citizen to enter ours. If individuals are not citizens of the United States, they cannot be considered for most positions in the federal Government through the standard process, as failure to provide a social security number when requested will result in the application not being processed. Some agencies can and sometimes do hire non-citizens through special hiring procedures, but it is up to the relevant individuals to contact the agencies directly to ascertain whether they are eligible for any available positions, and to find out how to apply.

Let us consider other countries from which nationals have joined our civil service under aliens certificates. In Thailand, non-citizens may apply for Government jobs

only with the permission of the relevant Cabinet Minister. Of the larger Commonwealth countries, Canada appears to determine any nationality criteria on a job-by-job or organisation basis. Job adverts state either, "open to all" who have legal status to work in Canada, or a preference for the job to be given to a Canadian citizen. In Australia, there is a general expectation that a person who is to be engaged as an Australian public service employee will be an Australian citizen, although non-citizens can be engaged in certain circumstances.

In Europe, some nations are more open than others in their recruitment. For example, in the Netherlands and Finland, civil service posts are open to all European economic area nationals and beyond, with the exception of reserved posts. Approximately 10 per cent. are reserved in the Netherlands—more than in the UK, where 5 per cent. are reserved.

I have spoken about reserved posts—those that are reserved for UK nationals, on the ground only that special allegiance to the Crown is needed. Under the Bill, the current situation would continue—that is a merit of the measure. Some posts would remain automatically reserved, while the responsible Minister could make others reserved. However, would there be an effect on non-reserved posts and the administration in relation to recruitment?

In the appointment process in the civil service, candidates are subject to two procedures: character checks in relation to recruitment and, when appropriate, the Government's system of security vetting. Character checks are used to determine whether candidates are likely to give satisfactory service and whether anything in their recent past is likely to bring discredit on the Department, agency or the civil service in general.

Let me deal with some of the wider practical issues that might arise from the Bill, and why I believe it merits further discussion in Committee. We must, of course, address national security. In particular, we should study carefully the range of issues around the checks that need to be carried out on those who apply for civil service or military employment, outside the context of reserved posts. They include the need for employing Departments to ensure that applicants are who they say they are, that they can check the applicant's employment history, nationality, immigration status and criminal record, and that, when the risk justifies it, they can carry out other checks concerning the applicant's financial position, integrity and trustworthiness.

The House does not need me to dwell on the reasons for the necessity for such checks—I suspect that hon. Members do not want me to do that, either. We are only too well aware that the threats to our security have grown in recent years. However, I emphasise that it is a vital responsibility of Government to do all they can to protect the assets of our nation and its people from any threats, by an informed assessment of the risks and by maintaining a proportionate range of measures to guard against them.

Protection against any possible insider threat is a central element of these measures. Under the Cabinet Office's new security policy framework, it is mandatory for all Departments and Government agencies to apply the requirements of Her Majesty's Government's baseline personnel security standard to all recruits. That covers the verification of identity, nationality, employment history and unspent criminal records. Details are available in the Library, as hon. Members know.

When a lack of UK residence makes it impossible to carry out meaningful checks in the UK, prospective employees are required to provide official and verifiable overseas police certificates obtained from the country or countries of residence, when those are available. Prospective employees should provide a reasonable account of any significant periods—six months or more in the past three years—of time spent abroad. However, the weight that can be attached to such evidence, when it exists, will vary from country to country.

When a recruit needs access to sensitive material or assets, further checks need to be carried out under the process known as national security vetting. Vetting for a particular post may be required for different reasons: the threats from terrorism and espionage; the consequences of compromise of sensitive information and other assets; information sharing across Government; and a wide range of agreements and security protocols with international partners.

National security vetting provides an assurance framework for Departments sharing information or allowing other access to their assets to employees in other Departments and agencies. Approximately 250,000 people are vetted or re-vetted on review each year across the Government, the defence industry, other Government contracts and the security regulated sectors, including transport and civil nuclear security. A wide range of international agreements and security protocols require the UK to apply appropriate personnel security controls, including vetting in certain circumstances. An effective vetting system therefore provides an essential level of assurance, not only for the confidentiality and integrity of our own assets, but for the conduct of business with our close allies.

A question that is often asked is whether the application of the nationality rules discriminates not only against individuals whose nationality falls outside the eligible nations but against those UK nationals whose spouses do not have the same rights as the spouses of other EEA nationals who are living and working in the UK. That is a reasonable question. The application of the civil service nationality rules is not discriminatory in law. Section 41 of the Race Relations Act 1976 provides that it is not unlawful to discriminate on specified grounds in pursuance of enactments, Orders in Council or instruments made under such enactments, or in order to comply with conditions or requirements imposed by such enactments.

Section 75(5) of the Race Relations Act 1976 provides that the Act does not invalidate rules restricting employment in the service of the Crown or by any public body prescribed for the purposes of section 75(5) by regulations made by the Minister for the Civil Service, to persons of particular birth, nationality, descent or residence. Further, section 35 of the Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2003 amended the 1976 Act so that it is not unlawful to discriminate against another on the basis of nationality, place of residence or the length of time of residence or presence in or out of the UK if the act is done in pursuance of any enactment, Order in Council or instrument made by a Minister under such an enactment, or in order to comply with a requirement, condition or arrangement imposed by a Minister under such an

[Angela E. Smith]

enactment. The cumulative effect is that, under UK law, it is not unlawful to discriminate on the ground of nationality, where to do so is to comply with obligations pursuant to primary legislation.

Concern has been expressed, however, that a Department might find itself open to a claim of discrimination if it determined that an individual could not be employed on the ground that they were unlikely to be able to satisfy a security check. Recently, an employment tribunal and an employment appeal tribunal found that a decision not to consider employing an Indian national on the ground that he was unlikely to get a work permit constituted indirect discrimination. That case involved a private law firm, not the civil service, but I understand that the precedent would also apply to the civil service. It is not inconceivable that, if a Department or agency rejected an application on the ground that completing a security check was either unlikely to be satisfactory or impossible, that precedent might well apply. Further, if a non-UK national were to be employed, having been subjected to a less stringent check than a UK national, might the UK national have grounds for complaint?

These issues merit further reflection, which is why I suggest that the Bill go forward for consideration in Committee. I have come to these matters only recently, but I appreciate that the Bill has tremendous merit. However, there are issues that the Government would like to explore further, and we are therefore unable to support it today. I would like to take some time to reflect on those issues with my colleagues, and it would therefore be helpful if the Bill were considered in Committee so that they could be discussed.

The Bill has been subject to consultation with Her Majesty the Queen, as it would have two identifiable impacts on the Crown. As the House has been informed, Her Majesty has asked the House to be acquainted that, having been informed of the purport of the Bill, she has consented to place her prerogative and interest, so far as they are affected by the Bill, at the disposal of Parliament for the purposes of the Bill.

1.9 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The Minister spent some 51 minutes setting out her reservations about the Bill. Given that it has such a historical background and has been considered iteratively over many weeks, months and years, it comes as a bit of a surprise to find that the Minister—who is at this moment talking to the Bill's promoter—or her predecessor did not spend more time talking to the promoter to find a form of words more acceptable to the Government.

As the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) said, this was originally a Government hand-out Bill, but the Government have had second thoughts, probably because some focus group told them that extending employment to non-British nationals in the present economic crisis, brought about by the Government, would not sound very good. That is probably why the Minister is now pouring cold water on the Bill, but she identified so many shortcomings that it is hard to understand how the Government would change their approach if the Bill went into Committee.

As the hon. Member for Hendon knows, I have had reservations about this and previous Bills under the same broad title that were debated in previous Sessions. My concerns are different from those articulated by the Minister. My current concern is that she, having poured enormous buckets of cold water on the Bill, now says that it is worth expending a lot more parliamentary time on further consideration in Committee.

The Minister made a good point about recruitment, which I have also made on previous occasions—namely, whether we really need to open up the civil service to a wider group of people who are not currently eligible to join its ranks. I must say that 487,000 full-time equivalents in the civil service is rather too many. The Minister says with some pride that it is the lowest it has been since 1999, but I would like to see the number reduced to the levels under the previous Conservative Government, if not further reduced. She is on to a good point there. She made some other points about fairness, particularly when some 10 per cent. of posts are reserved in the Netherlands, whereas they have already been reduced to 5 per cent. here.

I shall not speak at length, but I would like to put my reservations—not necessarily the same reservations that the Minister articulated—on the record. I congratulate the hon. Lady on learning the skill of articulating reservations at great length, albeit that she read them from her brief. We welcome her as a new recruit to the Government Front Bench on this subject. Perhaps next time she will be able to articulate at similar length without having to refer to any notes.

1.13 pm

Mr. Dismore: I have nothing to add other than to say that everyone agrees that there is a serious anomaly in the construction of our present law, so something needs to be done about it. I hope that the Bill will now receive its Second Reading.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Michael Lord): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the Aye Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 29, Noes 2.

Division No. 148] **[1.14 pm**

AYES

Austin, John
Bottomley, Peter
Brown, Lyn
Burt, Alistair
Caton, Mr. Martin
Clark, Paul
Corbyn, Jeremy
Dunne, Mr. Philip
Efford, Clive
Gerrard, Mr. Neil
Goodman, Helen
Heath, Mr. David
Hill, rh Keith
Hurd, Mr. Nick
Jones, Helen
Keen, Ann
Lammy, rh Mr. David
Meale, Mr. Alan
Newmark, Mr. Brooks
Prescott, rh Mr. John
Rammell, Bill
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Ruddock, Joan
Smith, Angela E. *(Basildon)*
Spellar, rh Mr. John
Sutcliffe, Mr. Gerry
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Mr. Stephen
Vaizey, Mr. Edward

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Dismore and Mark Tami

NOES

Harper, Mr. Mark
Heathcoat-Amory, rh Mr. David

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Christopher Chope and Philip Davies

The Deputy Speaker declared that the Question was not decided because fewer than 40 Members had participated in the Division (Standing Order No. 41).

Broadcasting (Public Service Content) Bill

Second Reading

1.30 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill is, in a sense, a sequel to the Bill that I presented last year on television licence fee abolition. It builds on some of the comments made during debate on that Bill, and approaches the issue from a slightly different direction. The argument is that if we are to have a licence fee, income from it should be expended solely in support of public service content. Ed Richards, chief executive of Ofcom, was guest speaker at a breakfast that I was privileged to attend earlier this year that discussed Ofcom's review of public service broadcasting and content. I asked him what part of the BBC output, funded by the licence fee, was not public service content. He assured me that the definitions of the genre of public service content are so wide and all-embracing that 100 per cent. of the output of the BBC is public service content. I do not think that that accords with common sense or with the views of most people.

I shall not get involved in lots of examples, referring to Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand, but I shall make the point briefly by referring to some programmes on BBC 3. In the last few weeks, I have been confined to barracks by a health condition, and I was able to note how various programmes on BBC3 were described by the BBC itself. I did not waste time watching these programmes, but one programme caught my attention—"Kirsten's Topless Ambition", which was produced by the BBC, funded by taxpayers' money and, according to the chief executive of Ofcom, is "public service content". The BBC describes the programme on its website as

"A documentary in which kids TV presenter Kirsten O'Brien must decide whether to take her clothes off for a lads' mag to try and clinch bigger presenting jobs."

It adds that the programme

"contains adult themes."

In other words, it contains smut. Why should that programme be funded out of public money raised by a poll tax—that is effectively what the licence fee is? I understand that BBC3 has very low viewing figures, and it is obviously trawling desperately to try to attract new viewers.

Another programme that caught my attention on BBC 3 was "Horne and Corden". The description of it read:

"Matt and James struggle at synchronised swimming, while gay reporter Tim Goodall investigates knife crime. Contains adult humour."

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that when the BBC is threatened with a lower increase in its funding than it was hoping for, which it deems a cut, it always suggests that it will need to cut important things such as news coverage and current affairs, but all it need do is cut out that kind of garbage on BBC 3 and stick to what most people would consider to be core public service content?

Mr. Chope: I agree absolutely. Indeed, that is what this Bill is about. It seeks to define public service content for the purposes of public service broadcasting. Clause 1(2) proposes that public service content should be

"content which is primarily produced in the United Kingdom".

[Mr. Chope]

which I think has a lot of public support. Why should we fund foreign-produced TV programmes and broadcast programmes from scarce public resources? Public service content would also have to satisfy one or more of the following criteria.

The first criterion would be that it should comprise

"local, national, international news or current affairs which is impartial, factual and objective".

The words "impartial, factual and objective" are very important. Perhaps I can share a little anecdote with the House. Hon. Members will recall that the Prime Minister addressed Members of the European Parliament, and his speech was covered by the BBC reporter Mark Mardell. In advance of live questions to the Prime Minister, the Member of the European Parliament for South East England, Mr. Daniel Hannan, notified Mr. Mardell that he would be making what he regarded as rather a newsworthy contribution to the debate. Mr. Mardell chose to ignore that and to absent himself from the Chamber, and as a result Mr. Hannan's contribution was not recorded by the BBC. However, we know that it was recorded by Mr. Hannan and put on YouTube.

Within a matter of hours, more than 2 million people had looked at the YouTube content of Mr. Hannan's pertinent criticisms of the Prime Minister. I can recall collecting my son from a friend's house in Surrey that same afternoon and I was immediately told, "You must come and look at this. Have you seen this on YouTube?" I had not, so I looked at it. Over those 24 hours, it was something that everybody had to see. I think that it was a brilliant piece of parliamentary behaviour by Mr. Hannan, for which I commend him warmly. I am sure that that is not the only reason he was so successful in the recent European elections and is the leading Conservative in the South East of England.

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): In fact, in less than 24 hours that recording became a worldwide phenomenon. Friends of mine from the far east and the United States e-mailed me the hyperlink to the speech. I had no idea that it had happened until friends of mine on the west coast of the United States e-mailed me and said, "You must see this."

Mr. Chope: I am grateful for that extra information on the worldwide appeal of our friend Dan Hannan MEP.

The point of the story is that after that occurred I wrote to Sir Michael Lyons, who I thought was the custodian of impartiality in the BBC. My letter to him, dated 8 April, was passed on to the director-general of the BBC, Mark Thompson. He was kind enough to respond personally to me on 27 May, apologising for the delay in his response. He recited the concern expressed in my letter, and said that he had asked colleagues in BBC News for their perspective. He said:

"They, like me, are sorry to learn that you felt that Mr. Hannan's speech received insufficient coverage."

Mr. Thompson did not even concede that he thought that it had received insufficient coverage. In a sense, he was criticising those 2 million-plus people who found great enjoyment and entertainment in seeing the clip. He went on to say:

"Choosing which stories to include in bulletins is of course a subjective matter"—

don't we know it?—

"and BBC News do acknowledge that not every viewer or listener will feel we get it right every time."

He noted that

"the main story of the day on Tuesday March 24 concerned the comments by the Governor of the Bank of England on the desirability of further fiscal stimulation. The clip of Gordon Brown at the European Parliament was used as part of the reports on BBC News outlets in the context of the wider story, rather than as a report simply of the PM's speech to the European Parliament."

The letter went on to say that I would have noted that, two days later, Mr. Hannan was interviewed on BBC News and on the "PM" programme. However, he was only interviewed then because 2 million people had seen the clip on YouTube and were wondering why there had not been a report on BBC News in the first place. To try to explain the issue by saying, "Well, we covered the story of the 2 million YouTube viewers" misses the point completely. The BBC went on to say—perhaps this is Mr. Mardell speaking in code—that Mr. Hannan was

"'completely perplexed and slightly stunned' by the global reaction to the speech."

That is what my friend, Dan Hannan, had said about it, with typical modesty, but I think that a lot of licence fee payers were completely perplexed and slightly stunned by the fact that Mr. Mardell had not felt it necessary to include the incident in his reports from Strasbourg on the day.

What was the conclusion from Mr. Thompson? By the way, I think that he is on £800,000 a year, but it does not matter about that. He ended:

"Thank you for bringing your concerns to our attention. I hope my letter has at least served to explain the thinking behind this editorial decision."

That is wholly inadequate. In fact, it is contemptuous. He is saying to those 2 million people, "To hell with it. We made that decision; we're standing by it. We're not even prepared to admit that we made an error of judgment in failing to anticipate the significance of that question to the Prime Minister." We have a lot to do before we can be sure that the "public service content" of some BBC news programmes satisfies the criteria of being impartial, factual and objective.

The second element of "public service content" to which I draw attention is the fact that it should include content whose primary purpose

"is to inform, educate or entertain children".

A lot of us are concerned that in the present squeeze on funding for public service broadcasting, traditional children's programmes are losing out. The definition of "public service content" in my Bill would ensure that programmes designed to inform, educate or entertain children would have a high priority and could draw on licence fee revenue as programmes that contained public service content.

The third category is content whose primary purpose is "charitable or religious". That speaks for itself. Again, there has been a lot of concern that religious or charitable objectives in broadcasting are being squeezed out in the BBC's never-ceasing search for higher viewing figures.

The fourth criterion would be that the content was not otherwise likely to be provided by the market responding to consumer demand. That criterion reflects the thinking

of, for example, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in its report. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is a member of that Committee and may be able to inform us of some of its thinking later.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman and the criteria that he is setting out. Am I right in assuming that he does not believe that the BBC should ever televise sport, which is not part of any of those criteria? Can he explain to me the rationale behind asking the National Audit Office, which is an estimable body in all sorts of ways, to act, in effect, as critics of future programming and to decide which programmes are going to be flops and which are not?

Mr. Chope: I shall deal with the National Audit Office in a moment. On the hon. Gentleman's reference to sport, none of the criteria would prevent the BBC from showing any programmes, but it would be able to be subsidised from the licence fee only if the programmes it was producing met the criteria of public service content, so if the BBC wanted to produce programmes such as those on BBC 3, to which I referred earlier, it would still be able to do that. Similarly, it would still be able to provide sporting programmes, and those would be funded by the licence fee if the BBC could establish that the content would not otherwise be likely to be provided by the market responding to consumer demand.

Mr. Heath: So I am right in saying that all the major sporting occasions, which many people look forward to seeing on the BBC, would not meet the hon. Gentleman's test and would not be able to be televised by the BBC under his proposals. People who could not afford to pay a subscription charge would not be able to see— *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) says from a sedentary position, "ITV." ITV is losing contracts for major sporting events because it cannot afford them. What the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) is saying is, "Either you subscribe or, sorry, the grand national, the test matches, the football cup finals are not for you."

Mr. Chope: The hon. Gentleman misses the point big time. One of the reasons fewer sporting events are now on independent television is that the BBC, with the benefit of unlimited public subsidies through the licence fee, has been bidding up the price to such an extent that ITV cannot afford to show such events. I argue that if the content can be provided by the market responding to consumer demand, it is wrong that it should be funded by the licence fee payer, who is effectively paying a mandatory poll tax for the privilege of being able to have broadcast receiving equipment.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend might be interested to know that I was at No. 10 Downing street today with Sir Peter O'Sullevan and Frankie Dettori handing in a petition to save horse-racing coverage on the BBC, to which I think the Minister is also sympathetic. The BBC is cutting some of the lower grade races to cherry-pick the big racing. Horse racing cuts right across the social divide, unlike any other sport, and people like me were brought up with fantastic people like Peter O'Sullevan, who encapsulated quality on the BBC. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is much more worthwhile for the BBC to cover horse racing, rather than spending £18 million on people such as Jonathan Ross?

Mr. Chope: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I regret the fact that much horse racing has been marginalised.

Continuing with a response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), sport that was not provided by the market responding to consumer demand could still be funded out of the licence fee. So the example of synchronised swimming on BBC 3 that I quoted earlier might be able to get funding on that criterion, but the hon. Gentleman misses the main issue relating to the funding of sport on the television.

Clause 1(3) states:

"Where the only criterion of public service content is that contained in subsection (2)(d)"—

in other words, in the case of market failure—

"the judgement relating to the likelihood of market failure shall be made by the National Audit Office, which must publish an opinion on any matter referred to it by the Secretary of State pursuant to this section."

That is because we cannot really trust the BBC to make its own judgments about the likelihood of market failure. Clause 1(3) would introduce a degree of external audit and objectivity into the equation.

Clause 1(4) says:

"No content shall be public service content if it fails to satisfy prevailing standards of good taste and decency."

I hope that that would have the support of all Members without demur, because a lot of the current output does not satisfy prevailing standards of good taste and decency. People may want to watch or listen to vulgarity and smut, but why should it be funded by a poll tax on licence fee payers?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe) *rose—*

Mr. Chope: I give way to the Minister, who I am delighted to see in his place.

Mr. Sutcliffe: Although I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we would want to see good taste and decency, who would be responsible for monitoring that and making decisions? Would it be the National Audit Office?

Mr. Chope: No, it would not, because I am not sure that the National Audit Office is qualified to do that. However, the National Audit Office would be able to receive complaints from people who, for example, felt that money from the television licence fee had been expended on programmes that only purported to have public service content complying with the prevailing standards of good taste and decency. The National Audit Office would be able to adjudicate after the event if such complaints were made.

I would expect the providers of content to try to apply standards that they would set and monitor themselves. Although I have already expressed my scepticism about how the BBC Trust operates, I did not think it reasonable to remove any sense of self-regulation from the Bill completely. I do not know whether this is a criticism of

[Mr. Chope]

the Minister, but clause 1(4) would, I accept, rely to a large extent on self-regulation in the first instance, although it would be subject to audit after the event.

Clause 1 is linked to the payment of the licence fee, because as clause 2(1) says:

"No licence fee revenue shall be paid to the BBC by the Secretary of State for services which do not satisfy the criteria of public service content in section 1."

It may come as a bit of a surprise to some people to learn that the licence fee revenue does not go directly to the BBC. Rather, the royal charter says:

"'the licence fee revenue' means any sums which may be paid to the BBC by the Secretary of State from time to time, pursuant to any Framework Agreement, to fund the services provided by the BBC for the promotion of its Public Purposes".

The money is therefore under the control of the Secretary of State. Under the terms of the royal charter, it is for the Secretary of State to decide how much of that money should go to the BBC. If the amount of content produced by the BBC that could be funded out of the licence fee were much reduced—which, unless the BBC wanted to change its agenda significantly, is what I suspect would happen under the terms of the Bill—there would be more money, either to reduce the licence fee or to be made available to broadcasters and providers that did want to produce public service content in accordance with the criteria set out in clause 1.

If one looks at the mass of documents currently circulating in the lively debate on the issue, one sees among other things a set of very patronising statements from the BBC, which in effect say, "Well, we're not sure that there's going to be any money left over at the end to prop up shortfalls in funding for public service content from rival channels and organisations." We know that a large amount of public service content online is currently funded without any subsidy, but it could be eligible for subsidy. We know also that ITV is being squeezed by the severe drop-off in advertising revenue, which means that it can no longer fund its public service obligations under the current regulations. The question is not whether we should have an ITV without regional news or children's programming; in my book, it is about how we can enable ITV to have regional news and children's programming. The Bill is one way of enabling that.

Clause 2(2) says:

"It shall be the duty of the National Audit Office to keep under review the total cost of public service television broadcasting";

clause 2(3) goes on:

"In pursuance of its duty...the National Audit Office must conduct, in each calendar year...a value for money audit of the expenditure incurred on the broadcasting of public service content that is funded by the licence fee payer."

That is highly pertinent and topical, because only a few days ago my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) was challenging John Humphrys on the "Today" programme on this subject, against the background of the National Audit Office report into the BBC's substantial waste of resources in respect of its radio output. Not only that, but my hon. Friend and the National Audit Office were critical of how the BBC fiddled the figures and has denied public access to material that should be available to the public on terms of transparency and accountability.

All that is set out on the record. We now know that there is tremendous pressure on the BBC to be more open about how much money it pays its presenters. There is an enormous article in one of our national newspapers today setting out the incredible figures involved in the salaries of some of the presenters and suggesting that they might be reviewed. Basically, the NAO report to which I have referred was suggesting that far too much money was spent on some of the high-profile presenters and not enough on the actual content. An important part of the Bill is that the National Audit Office would be brought into the frame to make sure that the money from the licence fee—the poll tax on everybody who has a television—satisfied the criteria of providing good value for money. The report on that would have to be published and laid before both Houses of Parliament.

We do not have as much time as I had hoped for, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I shall not refer to the wealth of other material that I have to hand. I say with all modesty that the House has to address the big lacuna of there being no definition of public service content. I put forward the Bill as a stab at that. It might not be the final answer, but I hope that it will inspire my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey), who is to speak from my party's Front Bench, to go along similar lines when we get into government. In that way, there could be a level playing field for all the media and communications outlets, and a common description of the criteria for public service content. There could be equal funding for all public service content and equal access to public subsidy, when it is deserved.

1.59 pm

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) has introduced an important Bill. Before I address the detail, it is important to understand the context in which the Bill is being debated.

People are right to be concerned that this Government have lost their way as regards broadcasting policy. Next week, on 16 June, we are expecting the publication of the Digital Britain report, yet we meet in the House today having lost the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who has been in charge of this consultation and has now gone to the Department of Health. We learned from our newspapers yesterday and this morning that the Minister responsible for Digital Britain, Lord Carter, is set to resign very shortly after the report has been published; rumour has it that he may be on his way to Australia. Having put forward the framework, he is to abandon the sinking ship that is this Government's broadcasting policy.

We also have a new Minister in this House, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Simon), who was recently appointed to take responsibility for Digital Britain and broadcasting policy. We have learned that he is unpaid. We should perhaps applaud the Government for trying to make some savings, having driven this country into the largest debt that we have ever seen, but it may also be a signal of how seriously they take broadcasting policy. With the utmost respect to the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), who I have got to know in the months and years in

which I have shadowed his Department, it seems extraordinary that today of all days, when we are debating such an important Bill about the future of the BBC, the Department has sent the Minister responsible for sport to the House, especially given that it has so recently appointed that talented Minister with responsibility for broadcasting, who displays his interest in and influence over broadcasting policy by not being in the Chamber but someplace else. Perhaps when the Minister winds up he can explain why his colleague is not here to deal with this important Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I have debated the future of the BBC licence fee in this House on another occasion, and I commend him for continuing to bring before the House important issues to do with the BBC. As I said in the previous debate, it is not Conservative party policy to abolish the licence fee; I will speak later about the principle of the licence fee. It is also important to state that I am a strong supporter of the BBC, as are my Front-Bench colleagues and, indeed, the leader of our party. The BBC is a bit like family, in the sense that we do not question its existence, and we admire and respect it, but that does not mean that we are not prepared to criticise it when appropriate. My hon. Friend cited some good examples of the programming that the BBC is putting out on BBC 3 that it might be relatively difficult for it to justify. I, too, have not spent my leisure hours viewing these programmes, but they seem highly questionable programmes for the BBC to fund. Nevertheless, it is important to restate the fact that all of us, in all parts of the House, should be jealous of the BBC's editorial independence.

I understand my hon. Friend's concern about the BBC's failure to cover the speech by Daniel Hannan, a Member of the European Parliament. I have known Mr. Hannan for very many years. In fact, he started his career—this is perhaps pertinent—as my photocopier: when I worked in the Conservative research department, he spent a summer holiday doing my photocopying. It was there—I would not say at my knee, but perhaps at my elbow—that he learned some of his guiding political principles, and he has gone on to become an astonishing success on a far wider stage than I have. The decision not to cover his speech is a matter for the BBC, but it is interesting that it was second-guessed by the great British public, and indeed the global public, who endorsed his remarks about the Prime Minister.

What do the public want from the BBC? I hesitate to cite a report commissioned from MORI by Ofcom in case it provokes interventions from many of the hon. Members in the Chamber who might be sceptical about its provenance. First, it showed—motherhood and apple pie, as it were—that the audience sees television as a key source of entertainment. Although the Bill sets out worthwhile criteria for the definition of public service broadcasting, it is important to remember that when people switch on the BBC, as much as when they switch on ITV and Sky, they want to be entertained. However, some of the valid concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch are met by the fact that people also want television to be seen as providing an understanding of British culture and identity as a whole, as well as building understanding and awareness between communities about different values, lifestyles and perspectives in the world around them.

Many respondents believed that the BBC had a role in educating and informing people. In fact, 83 per cent. said that they had learned useful things from television—whether that was from watching the BBC 3 programmes that my hon. Friend cited is not clear from the survey. Some 78 per cent. believed that television was influential in shaping public opinion. That addresses the point about the lack of coverage of Mr. Hannan's speech, although it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that our party continues to succeed despite the coverage given to us by the BBC.

Mr. Heath: You should worry.

Mr. Vaizey: Despite widespread pro-Liberal Democrats coverage on the BBC, they continue to slip in the polls, so perhaps we should not press the BBC too much on its news coverage, as it seems to be working in our favour and against the parties that it supports.

One of the most interesting things that MORI's report for Ofcom explored was whether television should cater for the interests of the majority or for different audience interests. Opinion was mixed, and some participants were concerned solely with their own viewing enjoyment and believed that their personal needs would be better met by programmes that catered for the majority. Furthermore, many felt that that would make economic sense, as it would help guarantee higher viewer ratings. When people were asked whether they would prefer a wide variety of programme types or more popular entertainment programmes, 59 per cent. opted for a wide variety whereas just one third chose more popular programmes.

It is important not to be too prescriptive about the criteria for public service content. Many great and well-loved programmes on the BBC would not fall within the criteria set out in the Bill—one need only think of "Strictly Come Dancing" or "Top Gear". I put on record my personal sadness that the BBC will obviously have to scrap another popular entertainment show, "The Apprentice", which has been an enormous success in putting business at the heart of popular entertainment. Obviously the decision by Sir Alan Sugar to take up a Government position and advocate Government policy would preclude him from carrying on presenting "The Apprentice", particularly since, as my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mr. Hunt), the shadow Secretary of State, has pointed out, the next series would almost certainly be broadcast during the next general election campaign. Of course, there is much time for "Suralan", or "Lordalan", as we are going to have to learn to call him, to change his mind and realise that his employment prospects are far more secure with the BBC than they would be with this outgoing Labour Government.

Mr. Chope: My hon. Friend will know that the Secretary of State has the power to authorise the BBC to enter into sponsorship agreements. Does he see that there might be a role for the Government to sponsor Sir Alan Sugar in the next edition of "The Apprentice" and make overt the way they are trying to manipulate public opinion?

Mr. Vaizey: As my hon. Friend knows, the amount spent on advertising by this Government has risen exponentially, and everywhere one turns there is now

[Mr. Vaizey]

Government-sponsored advertising. We fully expect that advertising to increase as the election draws near. As he will be aware, the shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), has made it absolutely clear that a Conservative Government would in no way manipulate taxpayers' money to promote Government policy in the shameful way that this Government have in the past 10 or 11 years. If the Government do choose to sponsor "Suralan", that sponsorship will end on day one of a Conservative Government. I can make that absolutely clear.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) made a valid point about what he thought was lacking from the criteria in the Bill. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch made clear, the measure has been introduced almost to provoke a discussion, and not to be over-prescriptive. However, I add my concern that the criteria do not include drama—which covers the well loved "Dr. Who", "Spooks", one-offs such as the plays about the early life of Margaret Thatcher, and comedy such as "Gavin and Stacey".

When the current charter settlement was agreed, the BBC was reminded that, above all, licence fee payers want entertainment. One of the clearest messages from the public consultation on the Green Paper was the importance of the BBC's role in providing entertainment. Audiences do not want an overdose of worthiness. The BBC was told to continue to take fun seriously, with entertainment ingrained in all its services and made central to its mission.

During Ofcom's second review of public service broadcasting last year, extensive and significant audience research was undertaken. There was audience support for accessible and effective delivery of the public purposes that underpin public service broadcasting. Most people still believe that such broadcasting delivers well-made and high-quality programmes.

It is also worth pointing out that our public service broadcasters still contribute 90 per cent. of UK-originated content—the BBC is in the lead there. For example, BBC 1 had nine out of the top 10 TV shows on Christmas day. They were all made in the United Kingdom and the top three were made outside London. More than half of all people watching television tuned in to watch "Wallace & Gromit—A Matter of Loaf and Death", which was the Christmas day programme with the highest ratings, with an average audience of 14.3 million.

I share the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch about the future of children's television, which is a live issue in broadcasting. The BBC provision for children is incredibly important, and the focus should be on what happens in some of our more commercial broadcasters' children's programming. They are finding it increasingly difficult to provide, partly because of Ofcom's strictures on advertising during children's television, which have rather backfired and made it harder to earn funds to make such programmes. That should be examined.

Although the licence fee has imperfections, it is probably the least worst mechanism for funding the BBC. However, we remain concerned that the BBC is set to exceed the total of private sector revenues by larger and larger margins. The free, plural media market needs a strong BBC, but it also needs strong competition. That will be increasingly difficult as the BBC gets £1 billion more in TV revenue and £300 million more in radio revenue than all commercial broadcasters combined.

We have set out a range of options to try to keep the BBC within recognisable limits. First, the increase in the licence fee from £139.50 to £142.50 should be frozen—the Government and the Liberal Democrats oppose that. We have also said that the BBC should start to publish the salaries of some of its highest paid executives and broadcasters, as well as their expenses. Our licence fee payers, who pay for that, should be able to see the figures. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch that it is high time the BBC was audited by the National Audit Office.

We are great supporters of the BBC, but that does not preclude our being its critical friends. We all have comments to make about the quality of the programmes that the BBC broadcasts—I am pleased that it is taking arts programming more seriously and appointing a senior arts editor to supervise it.

There is an important point at the Bill's heart: the BBC has guaranteed revenues, unlike commercial broadcasters. It is therefore in a unique position to take risks or make programmes that will perhaps not draw in huge audiences but are worthy in themselves and plug the gaps that commercial broadcasters cannot fill. The director-general of the BBC should keep that at the forefront of his mind as he steers the BBC through the last few months of a Labour Government and into the next few years of a Conservative Administration.

2.15 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey), who at least gives the impression that he has watched a television programme at some point. The most damning thing I heard from the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) was his condemnation of programmes, only to add, "Of course, I didn't watch them. I just know they were rubbish." Interestingly, one of the programmes that he damned had an intimate connection with a programme that the hon. Member for Wantage commended as a valuable asset, because "Horne and Corden" stars one of the major players in "Gavin and Stacey", which the hon. Member for Wantage recommended. I have seen "Horne and Corden" and it was absolutely dire, but that is a matter of personal taste, and has nothing to do with whether the BBC should be attempting to build on and repeat the success of a programme using another concept.

The difficulty with the Bill is that it gives the impression—which the hon. Member for Wantage was keen to dispel—that the Tory party has waged war on the BBC. That is a great shame, because the BBC is too important to be used as a political point-scoring machine by the political parties in this House. I want to state clearly and unequivocally that we have something very precious in the BBC. It is the fons et origo of public service broadcasting, on which much public service broadcasting elsewhere is based. We should be very proud of what it has achieved over the years.

Does that mean that I am uncritical of the BBC? No, of course it does not. Nor should anyone be uncritical of it. There are certain issues that we need to look at—or, perhaps more importantly, that the BBC needs

to look at. I am wary of politicians getting directly involved, particularly in the editorial content of the BBC. There are, however, expenditures at the BBC that are difficult to justify, and introducing more transparency into the funding of BBC programming and bureaucracy would be worth while. There is still evidence, for example, that the BBC uses several people to do a job that would be done by just one person in the commercial sector. I saw exactly the same thing when I was involved in medicine many years ago. I worked in the NHS and in the private sector when I was doing agency work, and I could see the difference between NHS operating theatres and those in the private sector. There were far fewer people involved in doing exactly the same job in the private sector. I actually think that the private sector went beyond the limits of safety in some cases, however, so there are arguments both ways.

The BBC needs critically to examine how it runs its business. An example is the number of duplications that we see all the time in news and current affairs. Different people appear to be doing the same job for different parts of the BBC, and we wonder whether that is really necessary. I would like the BBC to become better attuned to such issues. Some of the contracts awarded to what is called the top talent are difficult to justify in the context of broadcasting as a whole, certainly in the present economic climate, and I would like to see that question addressed as well. It is important, however, not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We must not allow proper criticism of the BBC to be used as part of a campaign of attrition against the concept of the BBC itself.

The problem with the hon. Member for Christchurch's Bill is that it does not provide a formula for public service broadcasting—not one bit of it. It provides for a desiccated, feeble imitation of public sector broadcasting that would be the equivalent of brown rice and cardboard as a diet to be put before the British public. The hon. Member for Wantage was right to say that entertainment is part of the mix, but it is not mentioned in the Bill.

Sport, as I said in my intervention, is an essential part of the mix, but it is not there in the hon. Gentleman's Bill. Culture of any kind is not there, unless it is so unpopular as to be unable to achieve programming in any other way. Excellence in drama is not there and neither is comedy—an area where the BBC has been groundbreaking over many years and has achieved great results.

That is why the Bill is unacceptable—never mind the fact that it sets up the National Audit Office, for heaven's sake, as some sort of arbiter of good taste, which is a function way beyond its normal parameters. I have a huge deal of respect for the NAO, but to ask it to decide whether programmes are in good taste defies any sensible definition of its present function and amounts to a most extraordinary suggestion by the hon. Member for Christchurch.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman mentioned sport. Will he tell us where he and his party stand on the BBC's proposed cuts to horse racing? Does he think it wrong when the BBC seems so determined to show only the races that any other commercial broadcaster would show, or does he think the BBC should use the licence fee to promote wider support for horse racing, particularly given that it cuts across every social divide in the country?

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman knows that I am not averse to going to the race track myself, particularly at Wincanton, where some of the best jumping in the country takes place; I also love watching horse racing on television. I have to say, however, that the hon. Gentleman should not support his hon. Friend's Bill because it would prevent that happening. Not only would it prevent that from happening, but it would prevent the grand national from being shown, and many people would be very disappointed at that. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Christchurch can shake his head as much as he likes, but such events are not covered in paragraphs (a), (b), (c) or (d) in clause 1(2)—and those are the criteria for public sector broadcasting.

If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that the broadcasting of such events should be funded from elsewhere, where is elsewhere? Where is the BBC to get the funding in order to show these big-ticket sporting events? That is the problem with his Bill. The hon. Gentleman has not thought it through. He is so intent on providing the extremely narrow spectrum of things he considers to be the best of public service broadcasting that he will not allow anything else. He will not allow any of us to enjoy ourselves: we must only be educated; we must go only to church services; we must see things that nobody else wants to see. That is going to be the function of the BBC. What a miserable future for the BBC, as prescribed by the hon. Member for Christchurch and his Puritan friends. I am afraid that I do not and will not accept that. I will not support the Bill today.

2.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe): I am delighted to participate in what remains of today's debate. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Simon), sends his apologies, as he had a pressing constituency engagement that was in his diary before he was promoted to his new post. Far from our losing our way on broadcasting, I believe that this Government's record of support for broadcasting and where it is heading for the future has been welcomed by the majority of the serious players in the broadcasting world.

Mr. Vaizey *rose—*

Mr. Sutcliffe: Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman, let me point out that the Secretary of State for Health and former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was in the House this morning—he is not lost; he made an important statement earlier on swine flu. The new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport furthermore was a noted distinguished journalist with the BBC and has a proud record on broadcasting issues.

Mr. Vaizey: Will the Minister explain why the Minister for Sport, but not the Minister for Broadcasting, gets a ministerial salary?

Mr. Sutcliffe: That is, of course, a matter for the Prime Minister and the Government. I actually think that the Minister for Sport should be in the Cabinet—*[Interruption]*—and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees. He should be in the Cabinet because sport is such an important issue for the whole country and it

[Mr. Sutcliffe]

affects all our constituencies. I would be very pleased if hon. Members raised that issue with the Prime Minister at every opportunity to encourage him to make the decision pretty quickly.

We have had an interesting debate, but it has been conducted in a tongue-in-cheek way by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). He may be consistent in the issues he raises about the BBC, but he knows that the Bill he has proposed would not achieve what he wants—or, perhaps it would, which would make it even more worrying for the BBC's future. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) hit the nail on the head in what he said, so we have to be careful. I think that we should be proud of the BBC as an organisation. It has a distinguished record over many years in accordance with its broadcasting principles. It has been and is revered around the world for the quality of its public broadcasting. While I agree with the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey) that we should be proud of the BBC—that is the only thing on which I do agree with him—we can, where necessary, be the critical friend that we should be; but, in doing that, we should in no way try to undermine the BBC, which has provided us with superb programmes for many years.

I was concerned about the comments of the hon. Member for Wantage, who half-supported some of what was said by the hon. Member for Christchurch. That sent a clear message. I thought that the hon. Gentleman's approach to what a future Conservative Government would do was rather arrogant. Any loss of the BBC's editorial independence would be very damaging. I hope that he will assure me that a future Conservative Government would in no way damage that editorial independence.

Mr. Vaizey: I am happy to give that assurance.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): There will not be a future Conservative Government.

Mr. Sutcliffe: As my hon. Friend the Minister of State points out, there will not be a future Conservative Government. In case that day ever dawns, however, we need to ensure that the BBC is protected.

It is important to establish where we are heading in regard to broadcasting. Having listened carefully to what was said by the hon. Member for Christchurch, I want to ensure that the whole House knows that it would be very dangerous to allow his Bill to proceed.

Mr. Vaizey: Given that the Minister asked me to guarantee the editorial independence of the BBC, will he tell me whether he thinks that the appointment of Sir Alan Sugar as a Government envoy, and his continued role in presenting a flagship BBC programme, compromise its editorial independence?

Mr. Sutcliffe: That has been covered in many different ways by the Secretary of State and the BBC Trust, and I think that the hon. Gentleman does a disservice in trying to score political points.

The description of public service television broadcasting that appears in section 264 of the Communications Act 2003 provides the basis for the framework of public service broadcasting regulation set out in the Act. In particular, it provides the basis for Ofcom's statutory reviews of public service broadcasting. Ofcom has already undertaken two such reviews, culminating in final reports in 2005 and in January of this year.

The Government believe that the framework set out in the 2003 Act provides a valuable starting point for examination of public service content. It may be helpful if I remind the House of the precise terms of section 264 of the Communications Act, which would be lost if the Bill were passed. The Act lists the purposes of public service television broadcasting in the United Kingdom as follows:

"(a) the provision of relevant television services which secure that programmes dealing with a wide range of subject-matters are made available for viewing;

(b) the provision of relevant television services in a manner which (having regard to the days on which they are shown and the times of day at which they are shown) is likely to meet the needs and satisfy the interests of as many different audiences as practicable;

(c) the provision of relevant television services which (taken together and having regard to the same matters) are properly balanced, so far as their nature and subject-matters are concerned, for meeting the needs and satisfying the interests of the available audiences; and

(d) the provision of relevant television services which (taken together) maintain high general standards with respect to the programmes included in them, and, in particular with respect to—

(i) the contents of the programmes;

(ii) the quality of the programme making; and

(iii) the professional skill and editorial integrity applied in the making of the programmes."

The Act states that a manner of fulfilling the purposes of public service television broadcasting in the United Kingdom should ensure

"(a) that the relevant television services (taken together) comprise a public service for the dissemination of information and for the provision of education and entertainment;

(b) that cultural activity in the United Kingdom, and its diversity, are reflected, supported and stimulated by the representation in those services (taken together) of drama, comedy and music;"—

as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome pointed out, drama, comedy and music would not exist on the BBC if the Bill were allowed to proceed—

"by the inclusion of feature films in those services and by the treatment of other visual and performing arts;

(c) that those services (taken together) provide, to the extent that is appropriate for facilitating civic understanding and fair and well-informed debate on news and current affairs, a comprehensive and authoritative coverage of news and current affairs in, and in the different parts of, the United Kingdom and from around the world;

(d) that those services (taken together)"—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 16 October.

Business without Debate

FUEL POVERTY BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (20 March).
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 26 June.

PROTECTION OF GARDEN LAND (DEVELOPMENT CONTROL) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 June.

AIRPORT EXPANSION (PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 26 June.

BROADCASTING (TELEVISION LICENCE FEE ABOLITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 3 July.

EUROPEAN UNION (AUDIT OF BENEFITS AND COSTS OF UK MEMBERSHIP) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 3 July.

CLIMATE CHANGE (SECTORAL TARGETS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October.

BRITISH MUSEUM ACT 1963 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (15 May).
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 26 June.

LAW COMMISSION BILL [*LORDS*]

Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Sri Lanka

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Helen Jones.)*

2.33 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I am very grateful to have this opportunity to debate the situation in Sri Lanka. Since the conflict between the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam came to its bloody end last month, some people might be tempted to shift their focus to other matters. However, enormous problems remain. In particular, I want to draw Parliament's attention to the plight of hundreds of thousands of people trapped in internment camps, and the need for reliable independent sources of information. The international community has a responsibility to take urgent humanitarian action, but the Sri Lankan Government have forfeited their position of trust.

As has been well documented, the conflict in Sri Lanka has lasted for decades. The 2002 ceasefire briefly raised hopes that an end could be negotiated, but peace talks stalled the following year. As the latest Library briefing paper acknowledges:

"While for a long time it looked as if there had simply been a return to the military stalemate...in retrospect the advantage was clearly shifting in favour of the Government."

In November 2005, President Rajapaksa was elected on a nationalist Sinhalese platform, and his Government

"appeared increasingly intent on achieving a military victory over the LTTE".

This culminated in January 2008, when the Government pulled out of the 2002 ceasefire. Even with the credit crunch enveloping the world, the Sri Lankan Government decided to invest an incredible share of the country's economy in fighting a military campaign against ethnic Tamils. Last year, they voted to spend $1.9 billion of the country's budget on the military. Coincidentally, they have since asked the international community, through the International Monetary Fund, for a loan. This is for a total of—believe it or not—$1.9 billion. Although it is claimed that this is to help Sri Lanka through the global economic crisis, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this money is actually to bankroll a massive military campaign against the country's own people. The international community therefore has a responsibility to think long and hard before it agrees to such a loan. If the loan is granted, it will send out the message that the IMF is the place to go for any Government who want to fund a civil war. I hope the Minister will assure me that our Government do not want the IMF to be seen as a fall-back for any country that wants to attack its own ethnic populations.

Throughout 2008, the Sri Lankan Government decided to take on the Tamils no matter what the cost, financial or humanitarian. It has been impossible to follow the conflict in Sri Lanka satisfactorily, because its Government have not permitted any independent reporting of the conflict. By January, they had used their military might to take the town of Kilinochchi and the causeway between Jaffna and the mainland at Elephant pass. The Government had more than 160,000 troops—in contrast, by February there were an estimated 1,000 in the Tamil Tigers.

Tamil fighters were concentrated in an area of about 30 sq km on the Vanni coast. Despite the fact that 250,000 Tamil civilians also lived in this area, it was subjected to repeated pounding by the Sri Lankan Government. The British Government led international condemnation of that tactic, which many people believe killed thousands of people. I am proud to support the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who, despite the pressure on him from diplomatic circles and all the other vested interests, recognised that it is not right for any Government to behave in that way. Governments need to uphold the very highest standards of behaviour. In February, he and the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, called for a ceasefire and full access to the war zone for independent humanitarian organisations. That was largely ignored, except for a brief lull in April, when the Sri Lankan Government said they were allowing civilians to escape. Many others saw that lull as an opportunity for Sri Lanka to regroup for a final onslaught, and only 300 civilians actually left the conflict zone at that time.

Two weeks later, my right hon. Friend visited Sri Lanka, but President Rajapaksa reportedly said:

"I don't need lectures from Western representatives".

Sri Lanka had always denied using heavy weapons against civilians, but on 27 April it then announced that it would cease using weapons that could cause civilian casualties. To most hon. Members that would be a pretty clear indication that it previously had used them and that the original denials were completely untrustworthy. The Sri Lankan Government's words therefore had no value.

It is impossible to verify the shocking numbers of those affected by the conflict, owing to the lack of any independent evidence, but they are undoubtedly huge. A quarter of a million people were in the so-called safe zone, facing daily bombardment; 80,000 people have died in the conflict since it began and at least 7,000 Tamil civilians are thought to have died this year alone. Even in January 2008, the US Congressional Research Service estimated there were about 300,000 displaced people in Sri Lanka, including Sinhalese as well as Tamils. A further 250,000 Tamils are thought to be living in London, having left Sri Lanka for whatever reason. The impact of the conflict has been huge.

Looking forward, even though the immediate fighting is over, most commentators agree there are going to be many problems. Although the LTTE has been destroyed, the grievances that led to its rise have not been addressed. Many Tamils actually opposed the Tigers, but they are even more opposed to the nationalist Sinhalese extremists. The way in which Sri Lanka ruthlessly crushed the Tamils will undoubtedly lead to resentment among those Tamils who survived the onslaught—indeed, to say that Tamils living elsewhere around the world are resentful would be an understatement. As Parliament has learned in the two months during which a protest has been going on here, British Tamils are anxious, angry and motivated. Many feel they have nothing more to lose. So far they have been entirely peaceful, but it is possible that some will have been radicalised by the brutality back home.

Britain has done more than almost any other country to resolve the conflict, but despite our efforts we were ultimately powerless to prevent thousands of Tamils dying. If we are disappointed and sad about that, we

can only imagine how Britain's Tamils feel. They are angry, and that anger is likely to be shared around the world. I therefore wish to take this opportunity to urge our Government to do all they can to work closely with Tamil representatives and ensure that their voice is heard. However, of immediate short-term concern is the fact that as many as 300,000 people are currently in refugee camps—that is the reason I called for this debate.

A kind of doublespeak exists when it comes to Sri Lanka. The camps are described by the Sri Lankan Government as welfare villages, but even the Library says that they are better described as internment camps. Last month, despite the desperate conditions in Sri Lanka, the last neutral organisation in the conflict zone, the International Red Cross, pulled out because the Sri Lankan Government had barred it from the camps. Some 300,000 civilians live in the camps, with huge numbers sick, malnourished or injured. But the Sri Lankan Government are still refusing to allow any independent monitors or agencies into the area. There must be unhindered access for independent international agencies like the Red Cross and the UNHCR to all the internment camps.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): As usual, my hon. Friend makes a powerful speech on the plight of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Does she agree that the camps should be opened to the media? One of the real problems in all this has been the complete absence of objective press reporting—indeed, any press reporting—because of the Sri Lankan Government's refusal to allow media access.

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come to that point later in my speech.

The conditions in the camps have not improved, and with the monsoon season on its way there is an even higher risk of disease. I hope that Britain can lead the way in calling for urgent humanitarian action now. Although the fighting is officially over, humanitarian assistance is needed now more than at any other time in the past six months.

The Government there have claimed that conditions are improving, but if that is true they have no reason to fear the presence of independent monitors or reporters, and if conditions are worsening, they have a greater reason to need the help of independent aid agencies. Many people fear that Sri Lanka's claim about improving conditions in the camps is just a way to prevent external agencies from showing the world what is really going on. It is illogical for there still to be heavy restrictions on the media, aid agencies and human rights groups entering the camps now that the war is over. I hope my hon. Friend will comment on the need for independent monitoring of the camps in his reply. I hope he will also comment on the need to ensure the safety of civilians and even former LTTE cadres.

In order to achieve a long-term peace, there must be reconciliation, and that means treating people with respect. It is not right to intern mass populations, and civilians must be allowed to resettle as soon as possible. Interning mass populations breaches the rule of law and Governments should not be permitted to repress minority populations through the use of long-term internment. Again, I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that this can be achieved only with independent monitoring.

As a gesture, the Sri Lankan Government should allow the mercy mission ship to unload its humanitarian cargo. This would show the world the kind of magnanimity that we are looking for. I understand that the ship is said to have the wrong paperwork and cannot be allowed to dock, but in reality Sri Lankan officials have been on board and know that the cargo is purely humanitarian. Given the exceptional need for humanitarian assistance, the Sri Lankan Government would earn a lot of respect around the world if they allowed an exception to the usual rules and permitted the ship to unload its cargo. Such a gesture would be much appreciated, whereas not allowing it to unload simply looks mean and unnecessarily nasty. I have written to the Sri Lankan high commission asking Sri Lanka to permit the ship to unload and I hope it will show that it has a heart.

I also want to take this opportunity to call on Sri Lanka to show heart over the case of doctors who looked after the sick and dying in the conflict zone. A group of doctors who worked in the conflict zone are being held on suspicion of collaboration and could be in detention for a year or more before being tried. Many people are concerned that the doctors should not be treated like this, and feel that they are in fact heroes rather than criminals. They have not been heard from since they were detained, but their work during the conflict has been widely praised. They treated patients in makeshift health facilities in the war zone. They undoubtedly helped to save many lives, and the UN has described them as "heroic". However, they were also a source of embarrassment to the Government.

As journalists and independent monitors were banned from the conflict zone, the doctors became one of the few available sources of news about the fighting. They told the world that shelling had in fact come from the Government side and had indeed killed civilians. Sri Lanka, however, has accused the doctors of spreading falsehoods and has implied that doctors were not really looking after civilians at all, accusing them of supporting the Tamil Tigers instead.

Sri Lanka wants the world to believe that not a single civilian died in its final offensive, but few people believe that. Imprisoning the doctors would help to hide an inconvenient truth. I hope that our Government will therefore do all within their power to ensure that the doctors are treated well and receive independently verifiable justice. I hope that my hon. Friend can assure me that the Government are doing all they can to help the doctors.

I have spoken to Ministers about Sri Lanka many times. The Foreign Secretary has shown extraordinary resolve in his efforts to help Tamils caught up in the conflict. Britain has, in my view, gone as far as any Government in working for peace and a solution to this humanitarian crisis. Our Government have repeatedly called for a political solution that establishes a meaningful role for Tamil and other minorities in national political life. Unfortunately, the UN has not covered itself in glory. The Security Council made strong statements, but we all know that words are not enough and there has been no action because Russia, China, Japan and Vietnam prevented it.

The cause of the Tamils has been my first foray into international relations and has been particularly depressing. Thousands are dead; many hundreds of thousands are homeless. They need our help now and I hope that the

[Siobhain McDonagh]

Government will do all they can to reassure Britain's Tamils, and everyone else around the world who believes in decency and values in foreign affairs, that we are on their side.

2.46 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) not only on securing today's debate but on her long track record in fighting to bring the plight of the Tamils in Sri Lanka to the House's attention? The issue is not only important around the world, but for the foreign policy values for which the UK should stand. It is absolutely right that my hon. Friend should choose now—at the end of a 25-year conflict—to raise these incredibly important issues.

Of course, we are relieved that the thousands of civilians who were trapped in the conflict zone are no longer at immediate risk from the fighting, but we must also be clear that this is no time for celebration. Too many Sri Lankans died during three decades of conflict. We may never know the final figure, but it is reasonable to assume that it was far more than the 70,000 that is frequently cited.

The significant challenges that now face the country are threefold: to provide immediate relief for the thousands of displaced civilians; to ensure their rehabilitation and resettlement; and to initiate a process of political reconciliation that is genuinely and authentically inclusive.

As my hon. Friend said, as soon as the fighting was over my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary spoke to the President and Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka and urged the Sri Lankan Government to launch a genuine political process and to address the needs of the internally displaced persons—the IDPs. I think that we would all be united in saying that the most pressing priority has to be tackling the humanitarian situation. Shockingly, there are now more than 280,000 civilians in the IDP camps. Any country would struggle to cope with that number, and that is why the presence of the UN and international humanitarian agencies is so important, but they can provide the much needed assistance only with the full co-operation of the Sri Lankan Government.

Since the visit to Sri Lanka at the end of April by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and French Foreign Minister Kouchner, the Sri Lankan Government have shown a greater willingness to issue visas to agency staff and to improve agency access to the IDPs, but problems remain. The camps are overcrowded and without adequate clean water or adequate medical facilities. Families who were separated when they fled the fighting have still not been reunited. The Sri Lankan Government must demilitarise the camps as soon as possible and grant unhindered access to the aid agencies and freedom of movement to the IDPs.

When they met last week, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary urged the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka to make continued progress on those fronts. He also made it clear that early resettlement must be an essential part of any reconciliation process.

We welcome the Sri Lankan Government's undertaking to return the bulk of the IDPs to their homes within 180 days. Of course, we look forward to seeing how they plan to achieve that, and how we could offer assistance. The recent visit to Sri Lanka by the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who was able to visit four of the IDP camps, and his subsequent briefing to members of the Security Council, were important, but continued engagement by the UN is essential to keep the spotlight of international concern focused on Sri Lanka.

The United Kingdom will continue to offer practical help in addressing the needs of the IDPs. Since September 2008, my former Department, the Department for International Development, has allocated £12.5 million to support the work of the international humanitarian agencies. DFID's contributions will continue to focus on the immediate needs of the IDPs, but they will also help to support displaced people in making a dignified and safe return to their homes. That could include activities such as mine mapping to assist in the demining process, and providing shelter and basic services for survival and the recovery of people's livelihoods.

We have always made it clear that there could be no satisfactory military solution to the conflict; my hon. Friend made that plain in her contribution, too. Lasting peace can come about only as a result of an inclusive political process, in which all communities in Sri Lanka believe genuinely that they are accepted and valued members of society. After years of conflict, the process of political reconciliation will not be easy. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made the point strongly to the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister last week that winning the peace could end up being harder than winning the war. We therefore very much welcome the comments made by the President of Sri Lanka in his victory day speech on 3 June:

> "The war fought against the LTTE was not a war against the Tamil people",

and:

> "It is now time to win the hearts of the Tamil people".

We also welcome his acknowledgement, at the end of the UN Secretary-General's visit, that

> "addressing the aspirations and grievances of all communities and working towards a lasting political solution"

is

> "fundamental to ensuring long-term socio-economic development"

in Sri Lanka. Of course, when it comes to those fine aspirations, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We will expect to see the details of how the Sri Lankan Government intend to take a process of reconciliation forward.

Any reconciliation will require legitimate grievances from the past to be addressed before we can move on to the future. The President recognised that during the Secretary-General's visit. We welcome the President's commitment, in his joint statement with the Secretary-General, to taking measures to address possible violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary re-emphasised the need for such a process of accountability to the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister last week, and urged the Sri Lankan Government to make it clear how they intend to follow up on the President's commitment.

We have always been clear that the United Kingdom would fully support an independent, credible and transparent investigation into allegations of breaches in international humanitarian law committed by all parties to the conflict. We cannot be certain exactly what happened during the fighting, particularly towards the end of the conflict, but enough reports have surfaced for us to have grave concerns about the number of civilians who might have died as a direct result of the fighting in the conflict zone. We are well aware of credible reports suggesting that thousands of civilians died between January and May this year.

I should like specifically to address my hon. Friend's point about the doctors. We are very concerned that the three Sri Lankan doctors, who had been on the front line in the war zone, treating wounded civilians, as she said, were arrested on 18 May by the Sri Lankan Government on charges, we believe, of giving false information to the media. When our Foreign Secretary discussed matters with the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister on 5 June, he raised that specific issue, and we will continue to follow the cases closely. I shall be happy to keep my hon. Friend informed of developments.

In conclusion, many challenges still face the Government and the people of Sri Lanka, but there is also an historic opportunity now to heal the wounds caused by years of violence and to create a Sri Lanka in which all communities—

Siobhain McDonagh: What is the Government's view on the access of journalists and international reporters to the zone?

Mr. Lewis: Any Government who are content with the way in which people in such circumstances are being treated should—taking account of security considerations—ensure that journalists have access. We hope the Sri Lankan Government will be willing to consider that.

For Sri Lanka to move forward, all communities—Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims—must feel that they have an equal stake in that society. We will continue to use our influence and continue to work with the Sri Lankan Government and other partners to help bring this about, so that we can move from conflict and war to an authentic process of peace and reconciliation.

Question put and agreed to.

2.55 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 2 June 2009

[MR. BILL OLNER *in the Chair*]

Light Dues

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mark Tami.)*

9.30 am

Mr. Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be here, and to be able to bring to the attention of the House the urgent need for reform of light dues—a tax on merchant vessels calling at British and Irish ports. Light dues are intended to cover the cost of providing lighthouses and navigational warnings around the coasts of England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, one or two minor territories in the Red sea and, of course, Gibraltar.

The maintenance, upkeep and modernisation of navigational aids around our coastline falls to one of three bodies—Trinity House for England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Gibraltar, the Northern Lighthouse Board for Scotland and the Isle of Man, and the Commissioners of Irish Lights for Northern Ireland and the Republic. Light dues are paid into the general lighthouse fund, and money is drawn from the fund to pay for the running costs of the general lighthouse authorities. The GLAs provide working capital and pay annual unfunded pensions for retired staff. Shipowners feel particularly aggrieved that they have for so long continued to bear the burden of such costs.

What hon. Members may not know is how long the controversy over the tax has been raging. At least three Select Committee hearings recommended the abandonment of lighthouse dues tax in the 1850s without success. The *Official Report* enabled me to do a little more research. I came across the Second Reading debate of the Merchant Shipping (Mercantile Marine Fund) Bill, which took place in 1898. As the title suggests, the legislation set up the mercantile marine fund, which was the forerunner of the general lighthouse fund.

The mercantile marine fund was often exhausted of funds and had to borrow to overcome a downturn in trade and industry—a condition that may have some resonance with today's economic situation. Some of the comments made 111 years ago by our predecessors in this place are worth an airing. One argument for the retention of light dues has always been, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." On 17 March 1898, Mr. T. Gibson Bowles, who represented Lynn Regis, said, in response to such a sentiment, that it was

"about as true as saying that because it is usual to skin eels they have been reconciled to the practice."

He also said that he hoped the Bill would be

"an earnest attempt to deal with a matter which has been a scandal for the last 70 years."

That takes the controversy back to the 1820s. He went on:

"I have looked into this Bill, and a more jejune, undigested, unsatisfactory, and unpromising attempt to deal with this matter I have never seen."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1898; Vol. 55, c. 137.]

Many of the comments made during that debate 111 years ago could quite easily have been made yesterday. I suggest that for 111 years, successive Governments have failed to reform the system. They are secure in the knowledge that the commercial maritime industry is simply worn down by so many unsuccessful years of calling for change.

To return to the present day and the real purpose of my debate this morning, I should like the Minister to respond on two main issues. First, the current system is inequitable. The charges paid by ships calling at British ports subsidise the costs of those in Ireland, which is quite bizarre. Secondly, another bugbear of the current system is the failure of successive Governments to tackle structural imbalances in the administration of the general lighthouse authorities. In simple terms, we have reached an identical situation to that of 1800. Then the general lighthouse fund borrowed £200,000. A figure in excess of the alleged £21 million deficit is now claimed by the Government to restore the general lighthouse fund to health.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): My hon. Friend has gone back in history and made an interesting analysis of the issue. There are a lot of old-fashioned taxes that may cause concern to many of us. Will he shed some light on what element light dues are of overall port costs? He has given the impression that it is a huge element, but my understanding is that it is a relatively small, albeit historically irritating, element of the overall port costs.

Mr. Turner: It is a relatively small element, but it is important in its effect.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): Although it may be a small element for merchant vessels, which deal in very big commercial transactions, it is a significant element for the fishing fleet. Why should vessels of the UK-registered fishing fleet that are just over 10 metres pay when they make no use of the GLA navigation aids and when other EU-registered vessels do not have to pay? It puts our fleet at yet more commercial disadvantage against the European fishers.

Mr. Turner: As the hon. Gentleman said, the UK fishing fleet has to pay those dues. I should like to draw the matter to the attention of the Department for Transport because it is dealing with it. It has allowed panic to set in. The investments held by the general lighthouse fund, which is still in a substantial surplus, fell by some £18 million. That was due to the parlous state of the economy. Meanwhile, the burden of the subsidy accrued to the Irish Government for maintenance of lights around the Irish coastline increased. The cause was the appreciation of the euro against the pound sterling, and it placed a further burden on the fund, currently totalling a staggering £16 million.

Astonishingly, the Department for Transport also accepted in its forecast a 4 per cent. annual compound increase in the costs of the general lighthouse authorities over the next five years. Things got even worse. On 23 February, the Government began a consultation

[Mr. Andrew Turner]

exercise on changes to light dues. Among the proposals were a hike of 6 per cent. net registered tonnes on light dues rates for merchant vessels calling at UK ports from 1 July, a rise in the tonnage cap from 35,000 to 50,000 tonnes and an increased cap on taxable voyages from seven to nine a year. As a result, the maximum charge per call became £20,500.

On the face of it, such adjustments do not seem dramatic. But the impact of the changes will increase the burden of charges on some sectors of the shipping industry by a whopping 115 per cent. Something close to my heart is the impact that such proposals could have on, say, the port of Southampton. I use ports such as Southampton and Cowes each week to get to and from my constituency. The Government assume that deep-sea vessels will continue to call at UK ports, including the busy port of Southampton, regardless of cost. I suggest that that is risky. Shipping companies have already said that they are examining how to reduce their direct calls, and some are considering adjustments in their sailing schedules, so we cannot and must not assume that shipping companies will carry on as usual.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some valuable points, some of which the Department for Transport could make to the Irish Government. On that last point, there is a general economic pressure, of which dues are not a part, to reduce direct calls. However, just in case he is thinking of linking the question of direct calls to the cost of light dues, does he have an economic analysis of how much calls increased as light dues, in effect, halved in real terms over the past two years?

Mr. Turner: I do not have those figures, but we are always as a consequence pressing for dues to decrease rather than increase.

No one will be surprised to learn that the situation has caused unparalleled outrage among the international and UK shipping communities. News of the additional burden has reached Bombay, Tokyo, Shanghai, New York and all world cities that control major shipping lines. What incalculable damage to our reputation as a leading maritime nation has been inflicted by the proposed tax increase?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jim Fitzpatrick): Will the hon. Gentleman concede that the damage to our international reputation would be incalculably worse were there to be a disaster as a result of not observing the maintenance that is required to ensure that the lighthouse services are maintained at the highest possible level?

Mr. Turner: That need not happen if the conduct of the process is more reasonable. The Minister is pressing in the wrong direction.

Jim Fitzpatrick: As the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Peter Bottomley) indicated, the costs of lighthouse services have gone down by some 40 per cent. in the past 10 years and have been cut four times. The service is not increasing its costs irresponsibly; rather, it has been acting with the best possible managerial efficiency. Notwithstanding that, there is a 5.6 per cent. cut this year.

Mr. Turner: I understand that.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): The statistics mentioned are of course true, but we must remember that other transport bodies have been expected to reduce their costs. The lights business has been transformed over a generation. Only 10 years ago, substantial numbers of lighthouse keepers were employed, so one would expect there to have been a very large cut in the cost base since that time—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Bill Olner (in the Chair): Order. Let the hon. Gentleman speak.

Mr. Turner: I am very grateful to you, Mr. Olner.

This is the point: the shipping industry put its faith in the Government to honour the commitments that were made in 2004. They promised to abolish the Irish lights subsidy and to take steps to eliminate the duplication of services provided by the three lighthouse authorities, but they have blatantly failed to honour those commitments. Eliminating the Irish subsidy alone would virtually solve the anticipated deficit in the general lighthouse fund, and requiring the general lighthouse authorities to implement a 5 per cent. cut in operating costs would eliminate the deficit altogether.

I fully support the efforts of the noble Lord Berkeley, who has introduced a Bill in the other place that would require the Government to remove the Irish subsidy and rationalise the three general lighthouse authorities.

Peter Bottomley: Just because I am a great believer in plain English, does rationalisation mean amalgamation? If it does, many people will think that the first thing that the new organisation would have to do is set up three different control centres.

Mr. Turner: That could be a consequence. Whether the authorities are rationalised, improved or abolished, the point is getting the costs down. I hope the Government will take the proposal seriously and that they will support such a measure. It could be introduced early in the next Session. The Minister will tell us that he is in negotiations with his counterpart in the Irish Republic, but before any such proposal can be made, will he make the notes of the meetings and frequent updates on the situation available in the Library?

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has been negative rather than positive in that he has not given his views on how the problem ought to be fixed. Does he agree that Britain and the Irish Republic are transparent about our port costs? Has he compared our light dues with those of other continental ports or ports around the world?

Mr. Turner: I approve of what is happening on transparency—we are at least doing things openly—but I do not answer for what is happening in continental countries, whether or not it should be happening.

Will the Minister set out a firm timetable for eliminating the Irish subsidy? He should suspend the proposed increases that are due to come into effect on 1 July pending the preparation of a new budget to reduce the administrative costs of the three general lighthouse

authorities. The Independent Light Dues Forum, which represents major international shipping lines, other trade association bodies and individual shipping companies of all sizes have all urged such action. It is imperative that the Government act to remove the burden of this proposed tax increase on ships calling at British ports.

In 1898, Sir Thomas Sutherland, the then Member for Greenock, said:

"I am quite certain it passes the wit of man to devise any scheme for imposing those lighthouse dues which shall be absolutely equitable. It has never been done, and it never will be done."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1898; Vol. 55, c. 170.]

I am more of an optimist—I do not believe that that is the case. Let this be the Minister's legacy: he could be the Minister who, after nearly two centuries of controversy, finally did right by the shipping companies and introduced a reform of light dues that is fair and equitable to our maritime industry.

9.47 am

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) has done well to secure this debate and to highlight the problem of maintaining marine and navigation safety equitably. Before anybody jumps to any conclusions about how this matter might be resolved, it is extremely important first to point out the great success of the general lighthouse authorities in creating very high standards of marine and navigation safety, and in looking after 20,000 miles of coastline. They have done so using regional knowledge, and it is vital for hon. Members who are considering changes in the arrangements to recognise the importance of organisations that have such local knowledge on which they can act.

As was correctly pointed out, there has been no increase in light dues since around 1993. However, I also recognise that we are in unprecedented global economic difficulties, which is affecting shipping as much as other industries, including in the UK. Therefore, any imposition of significant increases may well impose difficulties on the shipping sector, which is already under pressure. We are particularly concerned about maintaining shipping in the UK and the viability of our ports. No hon. Member would want to do anything to jeopardise that given the economic difficulties that we face.

That is the situation. The system of GLAs works effectively and the dues have not been increased for a significant time. Nevertheless, we are in a position of great economic difficulty in which we do not want to jeopardise shipping in the UK by encouraging shipping companies to invest elsewhere, leading to reduced investment here.

Peter Bottomley: I am glad that neither the hon. Lady nor my hon. Friend suggested that yachtsmen should have to start contributing to light dues. One of the great things about this country is that they can use the facilities without paying. I declare that I am a member of the Royal Yachting Association.

Mrs. Ellman: I note the hon. Gentleman's important points.

Last year, the Select Committee on Transport considered the draft Marine Navigation Bill as part of its pre-legislative scrutiny. It contained a provision that might provide part of the solution to the problem by permitting GLAs to engage in more commercial activities and to use their expertise to raise more income. The provision contained the necessary safeguards and the Committee supported the proposal. It is a matter of regret that the Bill has not passed into legislation and that that and other important clauses have not been enacted. I hope that the Minister will say what progress is to be made on that. Enabling GLAs to produce additional income by using their expertise is one way in which the issue could be addressed.

It is important that GLAs continue to take cost-saving measures. They have made great progress on that over recent years. The Department must continue to fund projects that look at more efficient ways of conducting such activities and lowering the costs. For example, the eLoran project is developing a land-based, high-powered, precise terrestrial radio navigation system. It is important that that project and others are pursued because they can reduce costs without jeopardising safety.

I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight on the subsidies given to the Irish Republic. I note that discussions on resolving that matter are ongoing, but more urgency is required.

In conclusion, I support the excellent work of the existing GLAs in maintaining safety. I recognise the major problems faced by shipping at the moment and do not think that we should do anything that would jeopardise the viability and success of that important sector. The funding of marine and navigational safety is a critical and ongoing issue. I urge the Government to consider other ways of enabling more income to be produced so that increased costs do not fall on users of the service in a way that could jeopardise the sector.

9.53 am

Mr. Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) for securing the debate and congratulate him on it. Not since I secured a debate some years ago on the future of the Stromness lighthouse depot in my constituency has the oxygen of public scrutiny come to fall on the work of the general lighthouse authorities. Such scrutiny is necessary. I will not stand here and argue against reform because, as he said, it is long overdue.

Mr. Mark Field: I do not suggest that our system is perfect. It has clearly agitated people in the industry for well over a century, as my hon. Friend said. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that some clear institutional and operational efficiencies are part and parcel of the system? Almost any reform is likely to be costly and there will be losers as well as gainers. Those who represent constituencies such as his will appreciate more than I do that we have a highly complex coastline and crowded shipping lanes, which require specific regional experience. The system we have allows for that. A new system could put it in jeopardy.

Mr. Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman has anticipated a great deal of what I will say. I am minded to sound a note of caution in the clarion call for reform. My concern is that we could end up with a system that does not have at its heart the safety of seafarers and shipping, and the environmental integrity of the seas around this country. That is what the issue comes down to.

[Mr. Carmichael]

The Northern Lighthouse Board, the GLA with which I am most intimately acquainted, is a curious creature. It comprises a sprinkling of people with an interest in and experience of the shipping industry, topped up, or adorned, by the Lord Advocate, the Solicitor-General for Scotland and the six sheriffs principal. I will pick my words with care because with the current febrile political atmosphere, the day might come when I appear again before some of those sheriffs principal. That risk stands for us all. I bow to none in my admiration for those people. I have known the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor-General for a number of years. They trained me in my early days as a trainee solicitor. They have many fine qualities and are admirable lawyers. I do not recall from my days as a trainee solicitor in the Crown Office any great discussion of matters maritime.

Although I do not doubt that the current office holders take their duties seriously and contribute vigorously to the work of the Northern Lighthouse Board, there is no guarantee that that will necessarily be the case. There is an argument that the structure of the GLAs—the Northern Lighthouse Board in particular—requires a careful look. My guess is that historically, people became part of GLAs because of the geographically diverse nature of the work. The current vast range of public service and bureaucracy did not exist. Therefore, there was a range of people with standing and ability in different geographical areas who could contribute something. However, let us not kid ourselves that this is any longer an appropriate structure for a lighthouse authority.

We must also look at the powers that are given to GLAs. I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) that it would be eminently sensible to consider the opportunities for them to engage in more commercial activities. That is long overdue.

To those who call for an amalgamation of the three bodies into one, I sound a note of caution. That proposal is superficially attractive, but I need to be persuaded that there are significant cost savings to be made. I have seen few occasions on which the solution to a problem has been greater centralisation. Before we move from a structure that can accommodate the different needs of navigational aids and lights in the north and west of Scotland, while allowing different approaches in the busier shipping lanes of the south-east, I want to be persuaded that it would bring a significant benefit. Again, this exercise must be driven not entirely by cost, but by the maintenance and continuation of good practice in navigational aids and by the safety of seafarers.

Hon. Members have spoken about the need to deal with the so-called Irish question. That much is genuinely, even in Government terms, long overdue, but we should not forget that although Ireland is one island, it has two states. Whatever solution we come to, the Irish Government must be brought to the table to pay proper dues, but we must not ignore the fact that we have a significant interest in Northern Ireland, from which there can be no walking away.

At the root of this issue are the finances of the GLF, which was recently described to me as being a pension fund with lighthouses. Given the dramatic way in which the service has changed in the past 20 years, that is undeniably the case. There have been significant cost reductions as a consequence of automation, and that is entirely sensible. I remember from my youth people who were employed as lighthouse keepers even in a small community such as Islay off the west coast. If one replicates that for the rest of the coastline, one realises there is a substantial legacy. The pension fund concerns the commissioners greatly, and it is no secret, either in the industry or in politics, that it was only the granting of a letter of comfort by one of the Minister's predecessors, David Jamieson, that has allowed the current situation to continue without major crises and drama. If we are not to see the increases in light dues and the caps that the hon. Member for Isle of Wight has talked about, there is a danger that we could precipitate a crisis, but the people who would suffer most as a consequence would be current and future holders of lighthouse fund pensions, and I would need to be persuaded that that crisis is worth precipitating.

One Voice, the Chamber of Shipping and others who have given briefings on this issue are right to make their concerns known, but we should not rush to assist them and put the interests of shipowners and the shipping industry above other competing interests. Lights and navigational aids have to be paid for somehow, and if it is not going to be from the current system, it will have to be from general taxation. That has been suggested by the shipping industry over the years, but has never found favour with the Government, for obvious reasons. The danger of taking the money from general taxation is that, as a global industry, the ability of the shipping industry to avoid paying tax is fairly well documented. I would want to see something pretty bomb-proof before we moved from our current system to something that relied on general taxation, even if any Government were ever to be persuaded to pick up the tab, although I think that rather unlikely in the current economic climate.

10.4 am

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) on securing the debate. He presented his case in a balanced and eloquent way, but he is a very assiduous Member, so that does not surprise me. He has brought before the House a matter that is important, even if rather narrow.

We are proud to be a maritime nation, and I hope that we can keep the navigation of our waters safe. The Minister has rightly pointed out that that is the primary objective, and he will no doubt point it out again. The aims of ensuring the safety of our waters and navigation, and of modernising and making more efficient the general lighthouse authorities, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The GLA structure is old, and I do not see why we should not carefully consider amalgamating the three lighthouse boards. That seems a sensible way forward, not just to save costs, although that is important, but to spread best practice and have economies of scale. We should consider that suggestion, and should also resolve the problem of our subsidy of the Irish. Any programme should grasp that matter and deliver that change.

I want to make a brief contribution on behalf of fishermen who have to pay light dues if they have a boat of more than 10 metres. UK-registered fishing vessels pay those dues, but I think we all understand that fishermen are having a particularly tough time at the

moment with fuel costs and quotas, which are killing them—especially the small inshore fleets, which are not only boats of under 10 metres; many boats of just over 10 metres never go near the GLA-provided navigation aids, but must still pay a contribution towards them, even though they do not use them. They are at a great competitive disadvantage against vessels that are registered in other EU countries, which do not pay the dues, and there is a perception that those vessels do not adhere to many of the rules or regulations. Our fishermen feel particularly aggrieved about that problem.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman's assertion that fishing vessels do not use the services provided by the GLAs. It is clear from my information that they do. Notwithstanding that, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that it will reimburse lighthouse dues to fishermen in England and Wales this year. Is he aware of that?

Bob Spink: No, I was not aware of that. I am grateful to the Minister for that briefing, and to the Minister with responsibility for fisheries, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who probably made that announcement.

There are many larger fishing vessels that go out to sea and use the navigation aids, but I am talking about the sort of small inshore fleets that operate from Leigh-on-Sea and Canvey Island in Essex, and from the small Kent ports. They tell me that they have to pay light dues on boats of over 10 metres, and they are aggrieved because they do not make use of the systems provided by the GLA, so they are at a competitive disadvantage. I would like the Minister to pass a message to his colleague in DEFRA, who has set up the sustainable access to inshore fisheries project under the chairmanship of Alan Riddell. Will he ask him to take account of light dues when he considers matters of economic viability, sustainability, the environment and societal consequences in relation to the small inshore industry and the SAIF project? Will he ask him to extend further an exemption from light dues for all small inshore fishing boats, including those just over 10 metres? I am grateful to have had the opportunity to make those points.

10.9 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): I came to listen, Mr. Olner, but I have to indulge, I am afraid. I have had a great interest in marine safety ever since I was a young boy, when I wrote an essay on a sea rescue and won a prize from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Some hon. Members might remember that I put through the Marine Safety Act 2003, which plugged two loopholes in previous legislation that was attributable to the late Lord Donaldson.

We must remember that there have been at least three major shipping disasters—the Torrey Canyon and the Sea Empress, to name just two—and that Lord Donaldson wrote two magnificent reports which resulted, first, in four emergency towing vehicles being put around the British coast to rescue ships in trouble, and, later, more legislation. Today, Britain has some of the best legislation in the world on marine safety.

Having said that, the main problem that we face is wider than just light dues; it is about competition in the shipping industry, which, obviously, is an international industry. Responsible shipowners, who are probably the ones who are making the most noise about light dues, are in competition with shipping firms at the other end of the spectrum that invest very little in the training of their crews, including the senior officers, from the captain downwards, who are in control of their ships. They spend very little on maintenance of what are well nigh rust buckets sailing the seven seas, and the salaries and wages of the crews do not bear thinking about. That is the problem in the shipping industry.

When we talk about investing £90 million in maintaining buoys, lighthouses and the rest of the marine safety features that dot our coastline—20,000 miles of it—we are talking about a small percentage of total shipping costs. I believe that it is international competition that is making our shipowners shout about the light dues. Piracy must also be increasing shipping costs for some of our main shipowners who travel down the east coast of Africa.

We must praise Trinity House. Very little has been said about it, but it collects 87 per cent. of the revenue. It was mentioned that it has reduced its costs by 50 per cent. in the past 10 years alone, yet there has been no increase in light dues since 1993. Let us give credit where it is due. How has Trinity House managed that? As the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) said, lighthouses have been automated, but they still have to be regularly serviced by helicopters to ensure that the lights are always working, particularly in the most dangerous outlying situations.

We are talking about the British isles plus the coastline of the Irish Republic—20,000 miles of some of the most dangerous coastline in the world. Shipping coming into Liverpool has to negotiate Ireland. Surely that is part of the reason why we subsidise the Commissioners of Irish Lights. When we talk about the CIL, we are talking about the whole of Ireland. Obviously, we have to subsidise the part of Ireland that the British Government are responsible for, but shipping coming into Liverpool, Cardiff and other ports, including some of the smaller ports, has to negotiate Ireland. If Ireland were not properly lit and buoys were not properly placed in the sea around the Irish coast, it would be far more dangerous for shipping to come into ports such as Liverpool. Therefore, I cannot get as anxious as some hon. Members are about subsidising the CIL.

How have Trinity House and the other general lighthouse authorities managed to achieve such a massive reduction in their expenditure? Apart from automation, which includes solarisation—I am always amazed by the many solar panels that are on top of buoys and attached to other marine safety features—they have made many redundancies, not just of lighthouse keepers but across the estate. They have massively rationalised their operations during the past 10 years, and they have sold land and property in their ownership and are still doing so, one of the most recent sales being at Great Yarmouth.

However, there is a warning for all three of the GLAs in this country. One shipping company made the point that it now relies more on global positioning systems. It said that it can almost bring a ship into a British port or any port in the world relying entirely on the one satellite that provides GPS. The ship almost drives itself if it is attached to GPS. Those are very expensive navigation instruments, of course, and they have to be paid for, but

[Dr. Brian Iddon]

what would happen if that one satellite were to go down? We would again be reliant on traditional and well-tried methods of lighting our coastline.

Mr. Brazier: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. Will he accept the counterpoint, which is that in an era of roll-on/roll-off and the channel tunnel, there is in fact no requirement for most ships to come into British ports at all? The real danger is that they will simply go to continental ports and shift their containers and other things straight on to the backs of lorries.

Dr. Iddon: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point. There has to be a balance, and we must weigh all the factors. My warning to the GLAs is that Galileo is to provide an alternative to GPS and the Chinese are planning to put up a satellite which will provide yet another alternative for automatic navigation. Satellites measure wave heights and record the weather. The whole business of international shipping is being transformed by great advances in technology, and I can certainly see that, within the next 20 or 30 years, the captains of ships that ply between international ports will rely more and more on satellite navigation systems.

This argument will not go away. Trinity House and the other GLAs should bear in mind—we could dream and imagine for a moment—that international shipping could, be navigated almost totally in the absence of captains by satellites in the sky. Governments and light authorities around the British isles and in Ireland must take advancing technology into account. To be fair to Trinity House, to date it has taken advances in technology into account. It has welcomed and adapted them, and that is why there has been such a tremendous reduction—I repeat, 50 per cent. in 10 years—in its costs.

10.17 am

Mr. John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr. Olner.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) on securing this important debate. As a history and politics graduate, I appreciated the history lesson that he gave us. It was a first for me to attend a debate in which an hon. Member has blamed successive Governments, including a Liberal Government. There is a first every day.

The hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) made a valid point about the impact that increased costs may have on the fishing industry, especially at a time of economic recession, and the Minister made a valid point about safety being of paramount importance. However, this debate is not about whether we are going to scrimp on safety but about how we will pay for it.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), who is the Chairman of the Transport Committee, referred to the report in which the Select Committee dealt with the possibility of general lighthouse authorities being able to diversify the work that they carry out to bring in extra income. The Minister should bear that in mind when considering how the system is funded in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael), who probably knows more about maritime issues than any other hon. Member, made a valid point about the need for structural reform but also the need to ensure that the safety of our seamen, our ships and the shipping industry in general is of paramount importance.

The Minister, who is also the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town until the next election, announced in a written statement on 23 February that the Government were consulting on proposed amendments to the Merchant Shipping (Light Dues) Regulations 1997 to deal with the estimated funding shortfall of £21 million for 2009-10. The proposals are for an increase in the rate of light dues from 35p to 41p per net registered tonne, an increase of 17 per cent., together with increases in the tonnage cap and the number of chargeable voyages per year. For the largest vessels, the charge per call would rise by nearly two thirds to £20,000 and the overall annual cost would be even more if they were frequent callers at UK ports. The maximum payable for a single ship in a year would more than double from £85,750 to £184,500. For smaller regular traders, the increase would be about 45 per cent.

One Voice, the organisation created by the shipping, ports and maritime business services sector, whose member organisations include the Baltic Exchange, the British Ports Association, the Chamber of Shipping, the Institute of Chartered Shipbrokers, Maritime London and the UK Major Ports Group, points out that increases of this magnitude are almost unprecedented and certainly have not been seen in the past 20 years, and argues that there is a significant risk that some ships will divert to ports on the continent, where lighthouse costs are financed through public expenditure.

In a recent letter to the Secretary of State for Transport, Michael Drayton, the chairman of One Voice, said:

> "It is clear to all of us from reading the proposals that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the economics of shipping: the assumption that deep-sea vessels will continue to call at UK ports regardless of cost is wrong. Several operators have stated that they will reduce their direct calls at UK ports by 60 per cent., and others are considering similar adjustments to their sailing schedules. Nor is it safe to assume that a reduction in calls by deep-sea vessels inbound from the Far East would be offset by a rise in calls by feeder ships. Container operators could readily reorganise their services so that UK cargo is trans-shipped at Rotterdam or another European hub and then fed to/from the UK on other available deep-sea services. Once direct calls by inbound deep sea vessels have been stopped, they are very unlikely to be reinstated."

I would be grateful if the Minister told hon. Members what assessment has been made of the likelihood that the increased charges will result in reduced direct calls at UK ports and what financial impact there would be if operators did reduce their direct calls by up to 60 per cent.

Mr. Carmichael: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Government must make an early and hard-headed assessment of the likely impact, but does he agree that light dues are just one of the costs of bringing ships into harbour and that, given the increasing scale of shipping, the increases that we are talking about must be set in that wider context?

Mr. Leech: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree that the issue needs to be considered in the context of the overall costs for the shipping industry.

The shipping industry will obviously try to fight its corner as much as is humanly possible. That is reflected in the letter sent by One Voice to the Secretary of State.

Will the Minister accept that there is a danger that the increased charges could be more than offset by a reduction in ships if the doomsday scenario set out by the shipping industry came to fruition? If that were the case, would the Government intend simply to increase light dues again to offset the losses made as a result of ships not going to and from British ports?

Are these hikes in charges really acceptable during a recession? The loss of direct calls by deep-sea vessels would make UK trade more expensive, with cargoes attracting additional terminal handling charges at the transhipment ports. There would be a serious risk of economic activity and jobs transferring to continental ports if that happened. At a time when hundreds of thousands of British workers are losing their jobs, the industry is understandably concerned about the impact that the proposals will have on jobs in the ports and shipping industry.

The Minister was able to announce a freeze in light dues last year, before the recession took a grip, and that was on the back of a reduction the previous year. Does he really believe that the industry can sustain these big increases now, at a time when the economy is on its knees? I am thinking back to the comments by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside about the unprecedented economic difficulties that we face. Has the Minister considered postponing the charges, at least for this year, to give the economy time to recover, or perhaps phasing in the increases over a longer period? How does he react to the accusation by Martyn Pellew, group development director of Teesport operator PD Ports, who has accused the Government of trying to kill off the ports industry?

One Voice has also claimed that increasing the number of chargeable voyages will reduce the competitiveness of short-sea and coastal shipping, thereby increasing the risk of modal shift and more lorries on the road. What assessment has the Department for Transport made of the likely increase in lorry movements and the resultant impact on carbon emissions if that happened? Should we not be encouraging the use of short-sea and coastal shipping as a way of tackling climate change and cutting congestion on our roads?

The Minister is likely to argue that the increased charges, while unwanted, are necessary to bridge the projected £21 million gap between the income and spending of the three lighthouse authorities. Nobody can dispute that the money needs to come from somewhere, through either efficiency savings or increased charges. The hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) is likely to call for the merger of the three lighthouse bodies. The Liberal Democrats would not currently support such a merger, and there is probably little to be gained in the way of savings by doing so, given that significant cost-cutting measures have been taken already in the past few years—a point made by the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon).

However, it is clear that a large proportion of the shortfall could be found if the Government delivered on their commitment in 2004 to end the annual subsidy of Ireland. One Voice calculates that it amounts to up to 75 per cent. of the projected deficit, and even the Government, in a parliamentary answer on 27 January, estimated more than £8 million being lost in potential savings in this financial year and about £30 million in the period since the then Secretary of State committed to ending the subsidy back in 2004. Will the Minister therefore give hon. Members a firm commitment on when the subsidy will end and offer some crumbs of comfort to an industry that will face real hardship if the charges are introduced now, during the recession? Will he also examine the viability of delaying increases in light dues, at the very least until the economy shows signs of recovery?

10.28 am

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): This has been a very interesting and thorough debate, with good points made in all parts of the Chamber. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) on obtaining the debate and on taking a very long view indeed on the issue. As the son of a distinguished international yachtsman, I was very taken with the quote from Sir Thomas Sutherland with which he ended his speech. It reminded me of the time when the Kaiser caused an incident by turning up in London at very short notice off the boat train at Victoria. The embarrassed officials from Buckingham palace who met him told him that King Edward VII was on the Isle of Wight—my hon. Friend's constituency—and he said:

"I suppose the man is boating with his grocer again."

When businesses face severe difficulties, there is a particularly strong onus on Government to minimise potential additional costs. As a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend, have remarked, the shipping industry has been particularly hard hit by the current economic turmoil. In January, *Lloyd's List* reported that freight rates for containers shipped from Asia to Europe had hit zero, with customers paying just bunker rates and terminal charges. The Baltic dry index, which measures freight rates for bulk commodities, had fallen by 96 per cent. Those were desperate times, and things have picked up a little since then, but in mid-April *Lloyd's List* was still reporting that 10 per cent. of global container ships were idle.

Shipping companies everywhere are busy analysing all aspects of their operations to reduce costs. Measures include service suspensions, slow steaming, service deviations, off-hiring chartered tonnage and lay-ups. Worst of all, many jobs are disappearing onshore and offshore. Last week, figures from Lloyd's Maritime Intelligence Unit showed that 26 ships with capacity of at least 6,000 20-ft equivalent units had not moved in the past 19 days. Sadly, Coastal Bulk Shipping Ltd, which is based in Kent, has gone to the wall. The company operated a fleet of 13 vessels and was engaged in the extremely ecologically sound process of coastal shipping. It employed 90 people, but they have lost their jobs.

The hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) mentioned the fishing industry, and I know from constituents in Whitstable that it is struggling. Although DEFRA's measures are welcome, they are only for the current year.

I have had discussions with several members of the independent light dues forum, the Chamber of Shipping and One Voice. I have also met managers at Trinity House and I am looking forward to visiting their depot in Harwich next week. None of us should doubt the

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[Mr. Julian Brazier]

difficulty or the magnitude of the task facing Trinity House and its two sister authorities. Britain is an island nation, and our sea lanes are our arteries. One of those arteries—the English channel—is the busiest shipping lane in the world. The Minister kindly arranged for me to visit the Maritime and Coastguard Agency headquarters near Dover, and I saw the printout of the shipping movements that took place at just one moment in time. It was impossible not to be impressed.

I must make it absolutely clear that Trinity House, the Northern Lighthouse Board and the Irish organisations do a first-class job. The Minister, the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) and other hon. Members are quite right when they say that nothing that we say or do should compromise the quality of the work that those organisations do. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight made clear, ships docking in the UK and the Republic of Ireland are paying light dues that apply in few other countries, including most other EU member states.

That brings me to the proposed increase in light dues. Trinity House informs me that light dues are now typically between 1 and 11 per cent. of total port charges and that they will go up to between 1 and 15 per cent. after the proposed increase. The planned rise ramps up fees from 35p to 41p per net registered tonne. For the largest vessels, the charge per call would rise by nearly two thirds to £20,000, and the overall annual cost would be even more if those vessels were frequent callers at UK ports. For smaller regular traders, the increase would be about 45 per cent.

In the current climate, the UK ship industry—shipping lines and ports alike—sees light dues as an albatross around its neck. I meant what I said when I stated that we must not compromise the quality of the work done by Trinity House, and there is no question of a future Conservative Administration expecting the taxpayer to pick up the bill for its work. However, we need to understand what the proposals mean for the shipping industry. To take one example, Maersk has told me that it will face an additional bill of £3 million per annum.

Light dues act as a cost multiplier. When shipping lines and ports are stripping out inefficiencies and costs, such a tax undermines UK competitiveness and retards the development of the UK's short sea shipping market, as evidenced by the collapse of Coastal Bulk Shipping. Indeed, we risk losing stops at UK ports altogether. In the era of the ro-ro and the channel tunnel, containers can simply be unloaded at Rotterdam or other major continental ports and put straight on to the back of a lorry. That is bad for British jobs in ports, it is bad for the regions of our country and it is very bad for the environment in terms of not only CO_2 emissions, but congestion pressures on the M25 and some of the most crowded parts of our road system. There is also a longer term threat to the City of London, as the world's centre of excellence on maritime issues, if large amounts of trade shift from British ports.

I will not repeat the eloquent quote that the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Leech) read out from One Voice, which echoes concerns expressed by the Chamber of Shipping and many individual lines. Instead, I want to look at some of the effects on the industry. COSCO is pulling one of its big container ships out and moving its route to Rotterdam. Maersk is considering pulling five of its six container ships out of their bases in Britain, and Grimaldi and APL are considering similar action.

Light dues are one part of an accumulation of measures that the Government have recently introduced.

Mr. Carmichael: If, when the hon. Gentleman concludes, the Minister stands up and says, "Okay, these increases won't happen. The pension fund costs and the operating costs can all be met from my Department's budget," does the hon. Gentleman really think that these shipping companies will not make the changes that he expects? Are they not perhaps operating in a wider economic context?

Mr. Brazier: The hon. Gentleman puts a perfectly reasonable question, but I tried to make it clear in the early part of my speech that the proposed increase is one of a number of factors. I will list some more of them, which have nothing do with light dues, but which have worked in conjunction with them to drive COSCO's decision to base one of its container ships at Rotterdam rather than here.

We have had the debacle over seafarers earnings deductions for those employed in part of the maritime sector. We have had the Government's plans for administered incentive pricing for spectrum frequencies, which vessels are obliged by international agreement to use for communication and navigational aids. Worst of all has been the destruction of businesses in many British ports because of the muddle over port rating. That is why I firmly believe that the Government must prevent light dues from becoming yet another nail in the coffin of British ports. We must look at a more imaginative way forward.

It is to the credit of Trinity House and its sister organisations that they have achieved a nearly 50 per cent. reduction in costs over the past decade. Now, however, they propose an 18 per cent. increase in costs over the next four years. Despite the fact that the general lighthouse fund was tasked by the Department for Transport with finding efficiencies, it forecast a 17 per cent. increase, and it has now come up with a slightly higher figure.

Much of the debate has focused on the Irish position, and I have exchanged a series of letters with the Minister on the issue over the past 18 months. As far back as 2004, the Government pledged to end this absolute nonsense, which has seen us pay roughly two thirds of Irish costs, but get roughly 15 per cent. of the value. As has been said, most of the deficit is accounted for by that single factor. How can that be right?

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to pensions, and the position is actually worse. I stand to be corrected, but I think that the last lighthouse keepers to retire were all in Ireland, so a disproportionate amount of the longest end of the pension fund will apply to the Irish side. The 2007-08 GLF accounts recorded the pensions liability as follows: Trinity House, £136 million; the Northern Lighthouse Board, £72 million; and the Commissioners of Irish Lights, £130 million. That is a total of £337 million, of which more than a third goes to Ireland.

The general lighthouse authority pension schemes are operated by analogy with the principal civil service pension scheme. That is a career-average, or final salary-based, non-funded, pay-as-you-go arrangement, although the GLF does of course have assets, which cover a portion of the liabilities. The GLA's net pension expenditure in 2007-08 was around £14 million. I hope that the Minister, who has recently been to Ireland, will tell us today what steps he is taking, or, better still, give us a firm date for the stopping of the subsidy. In particular, what will the small print say about Irish pension liabilities?

Several hon. Members have referred to the fact that there are three lighthouse authorities, and have considered whether there would be benefits from amalgamating them. Considerable savings have been achieved by working together in several areas. However, how can there still be six lighthouse authority employees who earn more than the Minister? He is good value—a good man in a bad Government. Interestingly, five of the six are employed on the Irish side.

The chairman of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), made an interesting point about more opportunities for commercial operations by the lighthouse authorities. Trinity House generated more than £2 million last year, I believe, from other commercial sources. That income, of course, goes into the GLF, and already helps, in a small way, to reduce light dues. The hon. Lady discussed the possible scope for expanding that approach, and I hope that the Minister will say something about it.

As to the issue of capital expenditure, virtually every private sector organisation in the country, and certainly every one with an involvement in the maritime area, is looking at ways of pushing capital spending to the right. An independent review by C-MAR commissioned by the Government and the three lighthouse authorities concluded that the GLAs could manage with the residual fleet once Patricia is retired in 2012 but that, in order to provide operational flexibility and "surge capacity" for emergency response, another tender, similar to Pole Star, should be acquired to replace Patricia. Has the Minister considered the proposal? I am told that Patricia is not especially old. Is a replacement really necessary in the next three or four years? Is the decision driven by safety, or is it just following former practice?

No one should doubt the need for navigational aids, or the difficulty of the task and the professional requirements of those who manage our sea lanes so well, but at a time of desperate economic difficulty for shipping and our ports we have a strong duty to reduce cost pressures wherever that can be done safely. Ways should be found of curbing light dues without compromising safety, starting with Irish costs.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jim Fitzpatrick): It is a pleasure to see you presiding this morning, Mr. Olner, as other hon. Members have mentioned. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner) on securing this important debate. It has been a useful discussion.

As well as the many aids to navigation that are maintained by the various harbour authorities, Trinity House has no fewer than three important historic lighthouses on or close to the Isle of Wight, at Nab tower, St. Catherine's and the Needles, with another on the opposite side of the water at Hurst point. The general lighthouse authorities may be among our oldest institutions that have an unbroken history. Trinity House dates from 1514, but, as many hon. Members have mentioned, the authorities are not old-fashioned. The 11 staff in their joint research and radio-navigation department have a worldwide reputation. In the new headquarters of the Commissioners of Irish Lights I recently saw their high standard of work and the control room where one operator monitors and controls the lighthouses around the coast of Ireland. Their performance regularly exceeds the highest international standards for all types of aids to navigation.

Paying for the GLAs is a contentious matter, and I fully understand the points that have been made by many hon. Members. The general lighthouse fund was created in 1898 to replace a complex system whereby lights were provided by a mixture of the GLAs and private operators. It pays for the GLAs in the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. The fund's income is mainly from light dues paid by ships using ports in the UK and Ireland and from investment income. It contains £44 million of pension contributions from GLA employees, which is sacrosanct. We can use the investment income to fund pensions and other liabilities, but we cannot use it for capital funding or operating costs. We must also maintain a sensible reserve for operational expenditure or unforeseen and uninsured costs. There may be an argument for reviewing the present system of light dues and the general lighthouse fund because it has now operated largely unchanged for more than 100 years. I am wary, however, of arguments that aids to navigation and the GLAs are unnecessary for large modern ships, because it is precisely for their benefit that the deep water channels have to be surveyed and marked, and obstructions monitored and dealt with.

In February we published our light dues consultation. As many hon. Members have mentioned, for more than 16 years light dues have not been increased. They have been reduced on four separate occasions during that period. That has meant a decrease of over 40 per cent. in real terms—an enviable achievement by the GLAs. Few public or private bodies could claim to have equalled that. In April 2006 the light dues rate was cut by more than 10 per cent. in the knowledge that the new rate was unsustainable in the long term but that it was possible because of the relatively high level of the general lighthouse fund, good investment returns and significant windfall gains from asset sales. The reduction was made after consulting the Lights Advisory Committee, representing light dues payers, who said at the time that they would support a necessary future rise in light dues rates.

As foreseen, an increase in light dues is now essential. What we did not foresee was that it would happen in a global recession, when investment income has virtually ceased and trade has reduced so that shipping companies are laying up vessels, rationalising routes and concentrating on larger ships. Fund income is falling and we must act to ensure that the GLAs can maintain their safety functions. I understand that the shipping industry has been hit hard; it has reacted quickly by making significant cuts. We have asked the GLAs to make cuts, to defer non-essential expenditure and to look at further efficiencies. They have made cuts of 5.6 per cent this year, but there is not such a close correlation between trade and spending, in their case. Lighthouses must be lit, radio-navigation

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

signals broadcast, channels surveyed and buoys moved. We cannot avoid taking steps to maintain those safety-critical functions, and all the hon. Members who have spoken accepted that. Expenditure deferred now may well result in greater costs in a year or two. We therefore have a difficult balancing act to perform. We have received 47 responses to the consultation, and I have held four meetings with the representatives of those most affected. I am now looking very carefully at all the comments before announcing any decision. I hope to do that within a few days.

With three GLAs, and their integrated funding, we have a co-ordinated lighthouse service for the whole of the British Isles which is efficient and second to none in the world. We are nevertheless in a difficult position because since 1922 the fund has had to meet costs in two sovereign states where income does not necessarily equate to expenditure in each country. Light dues collected in the United Kingdom are being used, in part, to pay for lights in the Irish Republic. A 1985 agreement recognised that, so the Irish Government make an additional contribution towards the costs. Both Governments accept that the 1985 agreement should be changed. We have done more work and, as has been mentioned, I recently met the Irish Minster of Transport in Dublin to discuss the matter. I am pleased to say that we agreed a better formula for apportioning Irish costs on a north-south basis.

We also agreed on the need for an overall assessment of the provision of the integrated aids-to-navigation service to all regions of the UK and Ireland. An evaluation is to be undertaken to consider all aspects of delivery, including continuing increases in efficiency, potential structural improvements and the overall financing arrangements. We now have the basis for making real progress. We will make every effort to reach an agreement that is more soundly based than the old one and one that ensures a fair apportionment of funding. The Irish negotiations also raised the question of whether the present GLA structure was the best.

Mr. Brazier: I am grateful to the Minister for characteristically giving way. I wish to make two quick points. First, will he tell us whether the subjects under discussion included the pension arrangements, which form a large part of the picture? Secondly, he referred to the 1985 agreement. That was set against the background of the appalling difficulties in Northern Ireland. We were desperately dependent upon southern Ireland at the time, so we had very little leverage. In the present situation, however, we should be in a position to tell another sovereign state that it should pay its way.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a very reasonable point. I have asked the simplistic question: can we turn off the lights? The answer is clearly no, as it would affect shipping going to the rest of the British isles, and not only that going to Ireland. We have an agreement with the Irish Government, and we need to negotiate a way forward from that. We cannot simply say to the Irish that we no longer accept the arrangements. The discussions in Dublin nearly two weeks ago resulted in a commitment to a ratio of 85:15 in payments for this year; and we have a commitment to consider the 50:50 payments in the longer term.

As I said, the Irish negotiations also raised the question of whether the present GLA structure is the best solution. There are good historical reasons for the position that we now find ourselves in, and we must protect the undoubted advantages that stem from the expertise and geographical knowledge to be found in each of the GLAs, a point made by a number of colleagues. However, I believe that we need to take a fundamental look at how the lighthouse service is provided, and that view is shared by the Irish Minister. Without Irish co-operation, implementing change will be more difficult. I do not intend to destroy the good service that we have, but we need to consider, in the 21st century, how it can be improved in order to achieve efficiencies that will deliver a better service.

We are already working on some matters; for instance, there will be a full review of the combined GLA fleet of ships and their management. We will be taking forward its recommendations with the GLAs. I will also be making an announcement once we have finished our analysis of the current need for funding the GLAs. That will have implications for their work programme for the coming year. Inevitably, they will have to bear some pain, but that cannot be at the expense of safety. That, in turn, will lead to the annual planning process for the three GLAs. I expect that their corporate plans will be given particularly thorough scrutiny in the autumn by the Government and the Lights Advisory Committee.

I turn to points raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) spoke of fishing vessels. Although smaller vessels tend to use port-provided navigations aids, they certainly rely upon GLA-provided aids outside the port and harbour limits. I heard what he had to say about DEFRA; it has given a commitment this year, but it is very much a matter for the Department in future. However, I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), will read the report of this debate, because it impacts on his area of responsibility.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). I am glad that he was provoked into making a contribution. He is highly regarded for his scientific and engineering expertise. We now know that he is also an award-winning writer. He made some telling points, and I am grateful to him for that.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Carmichael) risked provoking the legal authorities in Scotland. He obviously recognises that some of us have escaped their jurisdiction, so we would not be that worried about upsetting anyone if it led to an improved service. However, the matter will certainly be considered.

I was asked whether we will be placing the outcome of the Dublin talks in the Library. The answer is no: it is not general practice to put notes on ministerial meetings in the Library. However, I have covered some of the points made there in my speech, and more will become clear in due course.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Leech) spoke of the threat by shipping companies to decrease calls to UK ports by 60 per cent., going instead to Europe. The Department has commissioned a report from Raven Trading to review the impact of increases in light dues, and in due course the report will be placed on the Department's website and in the Library.

Indications are that the argument that ships will switch to continental ports because of the cost is not supported.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about support for short sea shipping. We have discussed the matter before, and I know that he realises that the Department offers freight facility grants to equalise the cost of coastal and short sea shipping to encourage a modal shift from road to water-borne transport. We are doing what we can to support short sea shipping, both in the UK and Europe.

Mr. Brazier: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. It is indeed true that his Department offers those grants, but will he tell us how much has been paid in grants over the last few years? I believe that it is very little.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I understand that there are three reasons for that. The first is the complicated nature of the application procedure, and we are simplifying that. The second is people's lack of familiarity with the grant, and we are trying to promote its availability. The third is European rules in respect of state aid. We have made strong representations in Europe, and have made some progress, to ensure that short sea shipping receives more aid from national and sovereign Governments, as we are not alone in being frustrated in our attempts to promote and support it. I accept entirely the criticism and concern that not enough is being paid out, and we are doing what we can to promote the grant and change the position.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) said that we need more urgency in respect of the Irish question. I hope that she accepts that my personal visit to Dublin indicates that we are taking the matter seriously, and that we have made some progress. My hon. Friend said that the regional and local knowledge of GLAs is important, and that we must recognise the economic difficulties of shipping. We appreciate the local knowledge of the GLAs; it is important, and we will take account of the many representations that we have received on that point before making our announcement. My hon. Friend also mentioned the Marine Navigation Bill. We, too, are disappointed that parliamentary time could not be found for the Bill, but we intend to bring it forward as soon as possible.

The hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) makes the point that few other countries have light dues. Of the 54 major shipping nations, two thirds impose light dues of some description. He asked about the Patricia, the Trinity House flagship. It is also used for cadet training, as well as in maintaining buoys and lights. All those matters will be considered at the appropriate time. The hon. Gentleman also said that light dues must be seen in the context of other pressures on the shipping industry. That point is entirely valid and fair, and we will take account of representations from the industry in reaching a decision on light dues. We have spent much time talking to the industry over the past few months to ensure that it realises that we want to hear what it has to say. The Patricia dates from 1986, and a smaller, modern, cheaper and more flexible ship is recommended. We will be considering the implications in due course, with the review of the GLAs.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight for securing this debate. It is good to see him back in his place and at full strength, having had to battle with serious illness. I know that many of us were concerned about him, but the fact that he is here this morning and leading this debate demonstrates that he is on good form again. I welcome that, as I am sure do other Members.

I hope that I have done justice to the work of the GLAs. I trust, too, that I have given assurances that the Government are not complacent in managing the general lighthouse fund and overseeing the lighthouse service. We will be announcing the outcome of our considerations following the submissions to our consultation within a few days. I hope that the results will demonstrate that we have taken account of representations from all sides.

Mr. Bill Olner (in the Chair): May I say that I found that discussion absolutely enthralling, given that I do not have a lightship or a lighthouse in my inland midlands constituency?

Public Analysts Service

11 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr. Olner, and I hope that you enjoy this debate too. There is certainly plenty of food in your constituency!

Food security is high on the political agenda at the moment. Population increases, and the consequent increases in prosperity and demand for food and energy, pose a huge problem in a world faced with climate change and global warming. However, we must not take our eye off the safety of our increasingly global food supplies. A succession of food scares before this Government came to power in 1997 led to the establishment, in 2000, of the Food Standards Agency, which is now the competent authority for the implementation and monitoring of food and feed law in this country. In practice, the FSA delegates many of its responsibilities. European regulation 882/2004 on food and feed controls requires adequate laboratory provision for the testing of food and animal feedstuffs throughout its member states.

In this debate, however, I want to examine the role of public analysts, who play a vital role in maintaining the safety of our food, and their relationship with the newly created FSA. Although food law is enforced by local authority trading standards and environmental health officers, the FSA monitors the performance of so-called food authorities across the UK under the Food Safety Act 1990, which draws a distinction between "analysis", which means chemical analysis, and "examination", which means microbiological examination. The latter is carried out, in England and Wales, by the Public Health Laboratory Service, which is funded by the Department of Health, and by public analysts in the case of food safety. In England and Wales, 460 food authorities, including 50 port authorities, also have responsibilities under the Food Safety Act.

Formal samples are divided into three parts: one for the sampling officer, one for the food owner and another for the food authority. The third part may be sent to the laboratory of the Government chemist, which acts as a referee in cases of dispute. Furthermore, the Agriculture Act 1970 requires local authorities to appoint an agricultural analyst to control the composition, labelling, sampling and analysis of fertilisers and animal feedstuffs, including pet foods. In England and Wales, the food authorities that carry out food standards enforcement are generally the same as those that carry out those fertiliser and animal feed duties. Public analysts are suitably qualified to carry out duties under the Agriculture Act.

Food, of course, is big business. It is estimated to be worth £150 billion annually, but only £8 million is spent on ensuring food safety through routine sampling and food analysis. The average amount spent in England and Wales, excluding London, on food analysis by public analysts is 10p per person per year, but the figure is as little as 2p per person in some areas and compares very unfavourably with the rest of Europe. For example, the Republic of Ireland spends 46p per person per annum. On average, one in five food samples tested attracts an adverse report owing to labelling or compositional faults. However, there is no centrally co-ordinated, strategic direction or funding of the UK's official food control laboratories, and there are no nationally agreed guideline budgets for sampling and analysis or targets for risk-based sampling levels to support essential food control work.

In the 19th century, there was a major problem with food adulteration, which often led to death or ill health. From 1860 onwards, there were several Acts of Parliament aimed at reducing or eliminating the problems and at improving nutrition. The first public analysts, originally employed by private organisations, were appointed in 1860. Previously, they had been deploying a range of analytical skills to the products of the chemical industry, and they extended their skills, which were limited to examination by microscope and simple chemical tests, to measuring and identifying the various contaminants of food samples.

Large-scale food adulteration, whether deliberate or accidental, remains with us today. The presence of dioxin in pork and lamb of Irish origin is a recent example. In 2008, Chinese milk distributors discovered that they could water down their milk without altering the protein content analysed by a nitrogen assay by adding a chemical called melamine, of which there had been a glut on the Chinese market. Consequently, its price had dropped significantly. According to the World Health Organisation, six children died and 50,000 people became ill as a result of that adulteration. The factory manager in China was, of course, sentenced to death. Scientists have now devised new tests for the presence of melamine in milk and foods containing milk, such as chocolate. However, at the end of 2008, one large UK port authority had to contact laboratories throughout the UK in order to find just one that could carry out, in a timely manner, analysis for melamine in foodstuffs imported from China.

The cost to UK industry, in 2003, of recalling the 600 different products containing Worcester sauce—not to be confused with Lea and Perrins Worcestershire sauce—contaminated with the Sudan 1 red food dye in imported chilli powder was between £100 million and £200 million. Noteworthy is the fact that the contamination was actually discovered in Italy, not Rochdale, where the sauce is manufactured.

When food science became big business, public analysts began aiding, as expert witnesses, the prosecution of offenders in court. In 1898, a new qualification was introduced by the Royal Institute of Chemistry to examine the competence of our public analysts. The mastership in chemical analysis—the MChemA—which has existed in its present form since 2000, is today a professional qualification of the Royal Society of Chemistry. I must declare an interest: I am a fellow of the RSC, a chartered chemist and one of the RSC's parliamentary advisers—unpaid, I hasten to add. The Institute of Food Science and Technology regards the MChemA as the essential and mandatory qualification for public analysts, as does the Food Safety (Sampling and Qualifications) Regulations 1990. However, the FSA believes that this postgraduate qualification, and the difficulty of acquiring it, is causing difficulties in the recruitment of public analysts, and the Government believe that the requirement for a food analyst is too restrictive under present EU legislation.

On 11 February, in a letter to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir Robert Smith), my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I am very pleased to see in the ministerial chair this morning, wrote:

"The proposed changes to The Food Safety (Sampling and Qualifications) Regulations 1990 will enable suitably qualified people to become official food analysts. This will help address the decline in the current number of existing analysts and ensure that the capacity and skills for analysis of food is maintained and enhanced. This will widen the market for analytical services, increasing capacity and providing improved access to a broader base of analytical services to ensure sufficient levels of control and consumer protection".

That is a worrying statement and suggests an end to the highly professional and highly trained public analysts as we have known them since 1860. It also indicates the possibility of more privatisation of the food analysis service. Will the Minister say whence these proposals have come, how much consultation there has been, how highly trained she expects analysts to be in the future and whether they will be adequately trained to represent themselves in the courts of law?

By contrast, the Association of Public Analysts believes that the MChemA and its holders demonstrate unique competencies in the application of analytical chemistry in the ever-changing context of food law and, more importantly, that they are able to present their findings in criminal courts. Furthermore, removing the need for this qualification and allowing official samples to be sent to other types of laboratory will not prevent the continued decline in food sampling and analysis.

Sadly, over the past 50 years, financial constraints imposed on local authorities, which hold responsibility for the majority of services, including maintenance of the ever more costly laboratory services, have led to such a decline in services that only 38 officially appointed public analysts are employed across the United Kingdom. In the past 15 years alone, the number of public analysts has been reduced by almost 50 per cent. Another problem is that 27 of the remaining public analysts are over the age of 50, and the omens are not good for recruitment. The lack of a career pathway in the public analysts service may lead to the loss of the MChemA, the professional qualification organised by the RSC.

In 1959, 150 public analysts worked out of 45 laboratories. In 1997, there were 32 laboratories. Today, only 21 laboratories remain and five of those form part of one private sector organisation. The remaining laboratories suffer from a lack of investment, and it is inevitable that more will close in the near future. Some of the instruments that have to be provided for the public analysts service today are extremely expensive indeed.

The most recent closure was a private sector facility in Birkenhead, with the redundancy of two public analysts. Also, recently, Aberdeen city council has agonised over the potential closure of its laboratory, but has decided, at least for the time being, to keep it open.

The public analysts service has reached a point of crisis. Of concern is the fact that between 2003-04 and 2006-07, local authorities' sampling activity fell by 16 per cent. across the UK as a whole. Some local authorities carried out no sampling in some of the years. The laboratories are headed by professional chemists, who deal inter alia with not only food but issues relating to fraud, industrial safety, water sampling, contamination of public water supplies following flash flooding and the testing of consumer products referred to them by trading standards officers. They test garden chemicals, poisons under the Poisons Act 1972, cosmetics, samples of contaminated land, dust samples, samples that might contain asbestos and so on. Their list of duties is endless.

The Hampton report on the regulation of businesses published in 2005 did not help. It said that because the standard of food was then very high, inspection and sampling of food premises should be reduced and resources more focused. Such recommendations were welcomed by the FSA and incorporated in the national control plan. That was despite the fact that the majority of criminal breaches of food law are detectable only by analysis.

In the past 10 years, local authorities' expenditure on their public analysts services has decreased from £12 million to £8 million. Ironically, we are spending progressively less on checking the safety of foods at the very time when national health service costs are rising as a result of food-induced disease, caused, for example, by energy-dense foods that lead to gross obesity.

In the 2007-08 annual report, the chief scientist at the FSA flagged up the fact that the incidence of certain types of food-borne illness appears to be rising at the moment. It is clear to me that there is a tension between the newly created FSA, which has a responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient scientific resources to provide public analytical laboratory services in the UK but with limited funds, and the local authorities, which have a statutory duty to appoint public analysts, but which do not have a duty to provide those expensive laboratory facilities.

Only two years ago, the Association of Public Analysts raised concerns with the FSA about the sustainability of its services. As a result, a review group was set up. As of today, we have heard no outcome from that review. I ask my right hon. Friend when the review group might report. Stakeholders from enforcement and consumer groups are concerned that while this delay goes on, the service is disintegrating almost to a point of no return. The RSC has also been concerned about regional variations in food sampling and analysis. It has written without success to the FSA to suggest that minimum standards should be set for local authorities for carrying out their food sampling duties.

The amount spent by the food and drink industry on advertising and promoting its products rose by 19 per cent. between 2003 and 2007, from £704 million to £838 million. A 1 per cent. tax on the 2007 figure would raise £8.38 million, which could be used to support the cost of running public analysts laboratories. There is central funding for regional laboratory networks for the Health Protection Agency, which is the arm of the Department of Health that carries out microbiological testing, for the Environment Agency, which carries out environmental protection work, and for the Forensic Science Service. Why is there not also central funding for the important area of food sampling and analysis?

I conclude my contribution with the following joint remarks of the councils of the RSC and the then Society of Public Analysts and Other Analytical Chemists:

"The duties of the Public Analyst are daily increasing in complexity and difficulty. Higher qualifications than formerly are required of him, owing not only to the general advance in science as applied to the analysis of food, but also the exacting character of the numerous regulations of government departments concerned".

[Dr. Brian Iddon]

Those remarks, which are true today, were made in 1923. I look forward to hearing what other right hon. and hon. Members have to say, and in particular to my right hon. Friend the Minister's reply.

11.17 am

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing this important debate and on his dedication to the public analysts service and all issues relating to chemistry and science? He is a great champion for those issues.

I agree with everything my hon. Friend said and I should like to echo and concur with much of the information that he has provided—I do not intend my contribution to be too long. I thank Duncan Campbell of the West Yorkshire Joint Services, which has a public health laboratory in Morley, and Alan Richards, president of the Association Of Public Analysts, for the information that they provided to assist me with my contribution to the debate.

I mention Duncan Campbell because I was lucky enough to visit the WYJS public health laboratory, which is just outside Leeds, a few months ago. I visited because it is the public health laboratory for my local authority. It is approximately 20 miles away, which is an example of the disconnect between local authorities and the laboratories that are available for them to use that my hon. Friend touched on. Local authorities are obliged simply to appoint a public health analyst or public health laboratory; they are not required to maintain or keep one, or to have one within their area.

My hon. Friend has already pointed out that the FSA has responsibilities for food analysis in this country, yet much of the responsibility is delegated to the local authorities. It is clear that the role of the public analyst and the public health laboratory is falling between the two. Taken to a logical conclusion, if we allow the closures to continue at their present rate, we could have a situation in which the 400 or so local authorities in this country are looking around for public health laboratories to appoint but find that there are none left, because nobody has a requirement to maintain them.

My hon. Friend made the argument very well for central funding for food testing, in line with other areas. As he pointed out, in this day and age there is an increasing requirement for chemical analysis of foodstuffs. He mentioned the Sudan 1 contamination of Worcester sauce, which led to a cost of £200 million to industry in recalling foodstuffs contaminated with that colouring. Such was the concern that, as a safety measure, supermarkets took from their shelves practically everything that contained any form of red colouring. Products are adulterated. We have all heard about the trick—one from days gone by—of injecting water into certain products to increase their weight. There is the example of melamine in Chinese milk.

A few years ago, I was concerned to hear about the amount of contaminated meat that was condemned and then recycled into our system—often into our schools—by the criminal fraternity making money from selling cheap meat. My hon. Friend mentioned that. As I recall, some meat that had been condemned was found in supermarkets. If that is not a good enough reason to have a public analysts service, I do not know what is. We must protect our food supplies, particularly for our children.

Although it relates to microbiological analysis, another example is E. coli 0157 food poisoning. I remember the outbreak of E. coli 0157 in Scotland over 10 years ago and the report of Professor Pennington. I was lucky enough to chair a meeting in this very room which he addressed with his findings about E. coli 0157. People think that it causes food poisoning or an upset tummy, but many people were killed in that outbreak, including several children, and many individuals became severely ill. E. coli 0157 attacks and disables the kidneys. Many people required kidney transplants as a result of that outbreak, such is the seriousness of that strain of E. coli.

My hon. Friend mentioned that Aberdeen is agonising over whether to maintain its laboratory. Aberdeen Royal infirmary probably had the longest list for kidney transplants in the UK because Scotland was the major country in the world for outbreaks of E. coli 0157. This is such a serious issue and it was on our doorstep. I well recall that presentation by Professor Pennington, so my message to Aberdeen is to retain as many laboratories as it can.

My hon. Friend mentioned the funding issue and the price per head paid by local authorities on sampling and testing for public analysis. I will not continue down that route, but say simply that laboratories are having to increase their incomes by diversifying into other areas. The laboratories that carry out public analysis on behalf of local authorities and Government rely on the commercial funding from analysis for private sector organisations, and there is an argument that they should be completely publicly funded.

Dr. Iddon: Does my hon. Friend agree that the privatisation of more of the service might lead to a clash of interests because private laboratories could also act for the food industry?

Mr. Illsley: My hon. Friend is right that there could be a clash of interests with the food industry. I was going to come to that. The food industry in this country is worth £150 billion a year. It is a major industry in our society. My hon. Friend said that 38 analysts are currently employed. The figure I had was 41, but we will not argue about that. In 1994, there were about 70, and in 1955—some 50-odd years ago—there were 150. New technology and methods of chemical analysis have improved, but in the 1950s, there were no freezers, and we were not aware of any E numbers, additives or colourings, so all our food was provided fresh. In this day and age, there is a whole range of foodstuffs that simply were not about in the 1950s. We had more analysts then, but we need more now because of the plethora of different foodstuffs that we argue about day in, day out. The commercial clout of the food industry has to be borne in mind, and there has to be an independent analytical service that does not depend on commercial interests simply to stay in being. The service not only should, but must, be publicly funded; we have to have it.

Even now, this country and the European Union cannot agree on labelling for foodstuffs. We talk about the traffic light system and whether we should have

labels showing the salt and fat content. The consumer is usually pretty baffled by all this, simply because the industry will not agree on some of these issues. There is a need for proper analysis of our foodstuffs so that consumers can know exactly what they are eating, and especially so that we can know what we are giving to our children. Obesity is an issue, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, as is the fact that we are eating different foods, which contain more sugar and fat, from those that we were eating in the 1950s and 1960s.

I echo what my hon. Friend said about the FSA wanting to reduce the qualification required for public analysts from a mastership in chemical analysis to a lesser qualification. Why is it that when we are faced with a situation like this, we think that instead of training more people, we will dumb down the qualification a little? If we are short of teachers, should we reduce the teaching qualification and bring in untrained teaching assistants? We probably do that to some extent, but we should not. We should train more people and keep the qualification, especially given what the analysts are dealing with day in and day out—with Sudan 1 and melamine. My hon. Friend is a trained chemist and I am not. I have no idea what melamine would look or taste like, and neither would the average guy in the street. Highly trained individuals are required for that work, and I urge the Government not to allow the FSA to start dumbing down the profession.

As I have mentioned, the funding from the FSA is delegated to local authorities. My hon. Friend has mentioned a 1 per cent. levy on the food industry for food advertising, and I agree fully with that proposal, because it is a huge industry that makes a lot of money. When there is a mistake or problem, as with Sudan 1, it costs the industry a lot of money with recalls and the drop in sales when products are found to be contaminated, so it would be worth the industry's while to be secure in the knowledge that we had a public analysts system that was funded by that levy. I understand that the levy would raise only £8.5 million, but that would be all the money needed to provide a good, independent public analysts service, so I echo my hon. Friend's call for that. We must ensure that we have the laboratories when we need them, such as when an outbreak occurs, because we will continue to have outbreaks and scandals such as that with Chinese melamine.

I shall conclude now, but I repeat that I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend has said, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. I sincerely hope that the Government will consider altering the structure of our public analysts service and will ensure that we still have one in another 20 years' time.

11.29 am

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing this debate. Broadly, I would also like to congratulate him on all the work that he does in this place in advocating on behalf of scientists and scientific services in this country. Over many years, he has fought for their cause and pointed out how valuable they are to our society. He has played a part in trying to recruit more of our youngsters to a career in science and has highlighted the importance and value to our society of scientific services. Here he is again today, reminding us of the importance of a scientific service—the public analysts service, on this occasion—and rightly drawing it to our attention because it is in serious danger of being overlooked to death. He is right to draw attention to its parlous state and to ask us to take action to try to prevent disaster in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central mentioned Duncan Campbell of the West Yorkshire analytical services. In preparing for this debate, I came across an article that he wrote for the *New Scientist* on 15 November 2008 called "Fears for food" in which he states:

> "The few of us that remain are very busy, but I'm not sure for how much longer. Every year the local authorities that take samples for enforcement purposes spend less on having food analysed."

That is a description of a worrying situation from an individual analyst, but I have read a briefing provided for us by the Association of Public Analysts which states that that is the situation across what remains of the service. It is a very worrying briefing.

I was not prepared to speak on the basis of just one briefing and so did further research. One of the surviving analysts laboratories is in Stafford, in my constituency. I visited it and met the staff and senior management there. Again, from my own investigations and discussions, I can confirm that there is a worrying situation that needs to be addressed.

The briefing from the APA states:

> "The uncontrolled and potentially terminal decline in the Public Analyst Service is not being addressed adequately."

What we need to do today is to insist that it is addressed adequately, and that steps are taken to reverse the decline.

Basically, we need this vital public service now more than ever, for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central made clear earlier. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East said, services are not organised in a strategic way. The Food Standards Agency is the competent authority for implementing food safety laws, but local authorities have responsibility for appointing public analysts. Beyond that, apparently no one has the legal duty actually to provide a service. That is a worrying situation. The upshot is that there are now just 41 qualified practising public analysts employed in 21 laboratories throughout the entire United Kingdom.

Let us take the example of the danger from food poisoning, which is one of the serious public health problems that we face and which the service works to protect us from. Food poisoning is believed to be widely under-reported to general practitioners in this country. It is estimated that in 2007 there were 850,000 UK cases of food poisoning, resulting in more than 19,500 hospitalisations and more than 500 deaths. This is a matter of major public concern.

The main hazards in food processes come from contamination; for example, bacteria that cause disease. The vulnerable groups who are most at risk from food poisoning are the elderly, the sick, babies, young children and pregnant women. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central mentioned that the UK's largest outbreak of E. coli 0157, in Scotland in 1996, resulted in the deaths of 17 elderly people. Another major outbreak of the same pathogen in Wales in 2005 led to the death of a school child.

[Mr. David Kidney]

The FSA is the Government agency set up to protect public health and consumer interests in respect of food, but although policy responsibility for food hygiene rests with the Government and the FSA as its agency, enforcement is primarily at local level by local authorities. In 2007, the Rogers review set national enforcement priorities for local authority regulatory services. It identified hygiene of businesses as one of the top five enforcement priorities for local authorities and gave two reasons for that: the high impact on public health and the potential losses to the economy if things go wrong.

However, because of the situation described by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East, we see inconsistencies in levels of enforcement by local authorities. For example, in 2006-07, fewer than half of all local authorities—about 46 per cent.—achieved all their high-risk planned inspections. When we consider how much they spend on their inspections and sampling, we find that the average spend per local authority is about 10p per head of population in a year, but some are as low as 2p, which demonstrates how poor it can be. As my hon. Friend said, some local authorities carry out no samplings in an entire year. In 2007-08, for example, eight English local authorities did not carry out a single test.

I have mentioned food poisoning, but challenges are also presented by food fraud and misleading labels. According to the consumer group Which?, food fraud in the UK is estimated to be about 10 per cent. of the total sale of food product—or £7 billion-worth of food products a year.

When Channel 4's "Dispatches" investigated food labelling, it found that misleading claims over salt and fat content were widespread. One test of six chocolate puddings—I will not embarrass the supermarket that sold them—showed that they contained, on average, 45 per cent. more fat than was stated on the label. One sample exceeded the amount quoted on the label by 64 per cent. From another supermarket, six samples of a chicken curry ready meal were found to be much fattier than the shoppers were led to believe. One had a third more fat, another had 91 per cent. more fat than the label stipulated.

Therefore, whether it is food safety, healthy eating and tackling obesity or protecting lawful businesses from unfair competition, the public analysts service is vital to UK national interests. Yet the sampling activity by local authorities across the UK has fallen sharply and continues to do so. Those involved in the service can only see the decline continuing. In recent times, the service has responded positively, which has been a crucial element in our defence against recent food scares, such as the melamine in milk products of Chinese origin and the dioxin in pork and beef from Ireland. The association's briefing warns us—the parliamentarians here—that the service at its current levels of staffing and equipment would struggle to react appropriately to any major new food scare in the future. That is a very sobering warning for us to take notice of in this debate today.

In Staffordshire, we have seen this pressure coming for years. The response has been proactively to get away from the terminal decline. We have formed a formal partnership with a service in Leicestershire, which has enabled us to stabilise, cut overheads and costs, take additional work and attract new contract work to maintain a sufficient critical mass of work to keep the laboratories in Leicestershire and Staffordshire going. Such a strategy has been successful so far.

For the purpose of this debate, I spoke again to the leaders of the service in Staffordshire, and they told me that they remain of the view—despite all that they have done—that without the FSA taking a strategic position to drive up the future level of food sampling and examination across the country, the service will continue to decline, leading to a complete breakdown of the service in the foreseeable future. That is a very serious warning from my own local authority about the catastrophe that will take place if we do not act. I say to the Minister that we need a better, stronger national strategy that provides firm links between the policy, its implementation and its enforcement. Perhaps we could have a regional structure for properly resourced, independent laboratory services and a realistic amount of inspection and sampling at the local level.

Finally, I say to the Minister, do not allow the service to decline any further. Do not run the risk of it becoming the Achilles heel of the UK's very valuable food sector and our vital national interests of food security and safety.

11.39 am

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I join in congratulating the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing this debate. The great value of such a debate is that it sheds light on an area of policy and practice that all too often gets ignored at a national level. It forces all of us to focus for a while on something that is clearly not in a fit condition and that needs a thorough reassessment by Government. It is important that the hon. Gentleman secured this debate and I congratulate him on it. I also join in the thanks to Duncan Campbell, who has clearly been very busy briefing hon. Members for this debate. He is the vice-president of the Association of Public Analysts and his passion for, and the central importance of, his work is clear.

As the hon. Members for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) and for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) pointed out, we are talking about threats to life as a result of a range of constantly present food scares. The main purpose of my contribution is to call for the Government to undertake a thorough reassessment of the current statutory framework and of the way in which the service is provided across the country, so that we ensure that it is fit for purpose and that it meets the risks and threats on which other hon. Members have commented. As part of that reassessment, it would be worth while for the Minister to agree to meet representatives of the APA, perhaps with an all-party delegation, to continue the discussion that has been initiated in this valuable debate. I would be extremely grateful if the Minister responded to that request.

I should like briefly to touch on the existing legal framework. The FSA, which was established under the Food Standards Act 1999, has a legal responsibility to carry out its functions

"to protect public health from risks which may arise in connection with the consumption of food (including risks caused by the way in which it is produced or supplied) and otherwise to protect the interests of consumers in relation to food".

That is the FSA's legal function and duty. However, as other hon. Members have said, the responsibility for carrying out those functions is delegated to local authorities. The FSA therefore has the legal duty and responsibility, but not the means by which to ensure that it meets it.

Responsibility is delegated to local authorities in two ways. When there is a two-tier structure, district councils are responsible through their environmental health departments for food safety. I am familiar with that policy because in a former life, I was a solicitor for a local authority and I prosecuted food hygiene cases—there were some wonderful cases—including one in which an Indian restaurant was charged with using a cricket bat to stir the curry. Anyone involved in the service will know of horrific examples of breaches of the most basic food hygiene standards, and I pay tribute to the work of those professionals. From my experience—I worked for Norwich city council—I can say that they are a highly dedicated group who provided an independent service for the safety of the public in the city. As I understand it from Duncan Campbell, samples that are acquired through district councils' work are sent to the Health Protection Agency laboratories at no cost to the district council, so there is no constraint on ensuring that sufficient sampling is undertaken to protect the public.

Separate from the work of environmental health departments is the work undertaken by county councils in two-tier structures or by unitary authorities, which involves food standards, labelling, contamination and so forth. Where such bodies require sampling to be done, they have to pay the public analysts to do it, and therein lies the problem. With local authorities under increasing financial constraints, the temptation is to reduce the amount of sampling, as the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East graphically demonstrated. The horror is that many local authorities undertake literally no sampling, with public safety and valuable sampling work subject to a postcode lottery and dependent on whether local authorities have the necessary financial capacity or political interest.

Superficially, this is an easy area in which to make cuts if a local authority is under pressure. The crisis comes when there is a massive challenge to food hygiene and food safety, but then it is too late. The headlines in the national press will ask "Where are the analysts?", and the answer will be that they have all gone because of financial cutbacks. This debate is therefore important because it gives us the chance to highlight a decline that has been under way for a considerable time and which must surely now be addressed.

Public analysts undertake vital work, and we have heard about the scare about melamine in milk from China, but when we talk to someone such as Duncan Campbell, we hear about the other, more proactive work that analysts undertake. Diet is a big issue, and the FSA is doing important work on reducing the salt content of food. It is also looking at other ingredients in food to ensure that our diet improves, particularly to address the growing crisis of obesity that exists in the whole of the western world.

Duncan Campbell talked to me about the work that he and his colleagues were doing with bakers in their area—in Barnsley, I think—to reduce the salt content of bread. That is good, proactive, local work, which is making a real difference to the diets of people who are often in quite impoverished communities. However, if the analysts are not there, the work is not done, and the effects will be seen in public health.

Duncan Campbell also talked about looking at food colourings in Indian takeaways. He said that the colouring added to chicken tikka takeaways can have a massive effect on hyperactivity in children. Again, that is an important public health issue, and he and his colleagues are working on it.

As other contributors to the debate have said, the decline in the service has been under way for a considerable time. There have been problems with recruitment, and there was the threat to the laboratory in Aberdeen. The number of public analysts is down to 38 across the country, and their age profile is also an issue. The hon. Member for Bolton, South-East talked about a point of crisis, with sampling activity down by 16 per cent. across the country and several local authorities undertaking no sampling work at all.

What do we do about this? I have no ready prescriptions to offer. Like other speakers, I am conscious of the fact that the food industry's value in the UK is enormous—£150 billion—and that a remarkably small amount is spent on food safety and independent analysis. One option that has been suggested is a 1 per cent. levy on food advertising. Another is to ensure that public funds are made available from taxation for this vital work. Whatever conclusion is reached, we can all agree that this work must be protected.

I conclude, therefore, by repeating my plea for a thorough audit of what is happening around the country, where, as we have discovered today, enormous and unjustified variations in practice exist. Once that audit has been completed, we need a thorough reassessment of the statutory framework, and of this arbitrary divide between district and county councils and between the work done by public laboratories at no cost to local authorities and that which incurs a charge and therefore places a constraint on financially hard-pressed local authorities. That arbitrary divide is open to question and must form part of a thorough reassessment to protect both the food analysts service and the public with regard to the food that they eat.

11.50 am

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to respond to this very important debate on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing it. Clearly he is an expert in this field. I also congratulate the Association of Public Analysts on briefing nearly everyone in the Chamber—apart from me! I shall not take it personally, however; it made me do a little more homework last night.

I did not have to dig too far into my memory bank to remember working with public analysts, not least around December 2005, following the Buncefield explosions—there were three of them—in my constituency, which severely contaminated my constituency, especially the public drinking water. Furthermore, as a former firefighter—back in very different times—I remember how, when damping down and finishing off, very often guys in different sorts of hard hats would come in and take samples, especially if there were problems related to asbestos or lead poisoning.

[Mike Penning]

I pay tribute to the work done by the analysts. When I started looking into the reasons for this debate, I was surprised by the decline or crisis, referred to earlier, in the skills that these scientists bring to the public sector. I had to delve quite deeply into the reasons for this current situation. We heard from other hon. Members about the work that analysts do, but we must indicate that this is not just about food, although clearly, as others have said, their work with food is vital, given that food is becoming ever more complicated and prepared food ever more common—people seem to have a taste for it, which is why the supermarkets and producers are selling and making more of it.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) referred to two supermarkets whose products were tested; it was frightening to discover how much what was in them differed from what the packaging said. Well, I am not frightened to name them: the pies were from Waitrose and the second supermarket was Sainsbury's. I do not want anyone thinking that these were tiny companies or small back-shop organisations; these are major companies that produce and retail their own products. It is important, not to name and shame them, but that the public do not think that only small companies are likely to do these sorts of things.

Analysts have other duties, however. I alluded to their work in testing public water supplies and testing for asbestos, but they also test other things that we use on a day-to-day basis, such as local swimming pools, lead fumes, industrial insolvents, children's toys for lead content, household and industrial cleaning materials and—believe it or not—even pet food. They regularly test not just food, but many different things in our environment—or at least I thought that they were being tested regularly, until this debate, but it is now clear that there is a postcode lottery with regard to the availability of analysts in specific areas, and clearly in some areas they are not available at all. How does that fall within the legislation? If some areas are not testing at all, how are they fulfilling their requirements under the legislation, or are we turning a blind eye?

In addition, why has the decision been made to downgrade the qualification required for those scientists? The service was set up so that they would be highly qualified scientists, with a master's degree. I am not a scientist, but I understand that that is where we are. They are scientists who wanted to specialise in this field. I wonder whether the decision has to do with the shortage of scientists not just in this area, but across the board. I declare an interest. My daughter is doing a science degree, and I cannot believe the interest that she has had from different organisations around the country and abroad simply because she is doing a science degree. She is very flattered, but I have to ask why we are so desperate for scientists in a country that has a history of producing some of the greatest scientists in the world. Perhaps the Minister will address the issue of why we have such a problem with regard to scientists.

The decline in the number of analysts is happening today. When I put my speech together earlier on, I understood that we had 41; by the time I had walked into the room and sat down, we had 38. I am not nit-picking about the numbers, but we obviously have a crisis, which the Minister needs to address.

The hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) said that we should have an immediate review. I tend to agree until I consider the fact that Alan Turner, OBE, conducted a review of the service 10 years ago. Mr. Turner made a series of recommendations to the Government, none of which has been implemented. Two years ago, the Food Standards Agency started a review at the request, I think, of the Association of Public Analysts. Where is it? Can the Minister tell us when it is likely to be published? It is very important that it is published as soon as possible, before we get into a situation of terminal decline and we do not physically have anything to review. I am thinking of what will happen if the decline carries on at its present speed and there is more delay in publishing the review. Whether or not the Government accept the review when it is published—it is being done at arm's length, by the Food Standards Agency—it is important that the country knows, and the scientists know, exactly what the Government's position is with regard to how we are moving forward.

[David Taylor *in the Chair*]

It is also very important that the public have confidence that the Government understand what is occurring, and have confidence in their services locally. The most disturbing thing that I have heard this morning is the extent of the postcode lottery. People in one part of the country could be relatively safe with regard to what they are eating, consuming, breathing or drinking, but in other parts of the country people may not be. I do not want to scare anyone—I do not want to scaremonger at all—but it is crucial that in the 21st century the public have full confidence that the Government of the day are protecting them. That is the duty; it is what the legislation was put in place for, and it is imperative that it is being done.

I am not being critical of the Food Standards Agency behind its back—the agency knows that I have spoken to it before—in saying that I think it needs to concentrate on its core activities. It has only a limited capacity and a limited number of things that it can physically do. Therefore, the message that I have given the agency privately and which I am giving it publicly today is this: please concentrate on your core activity, which is the public safety of food, so that the public can have confidence in that. I know that the agency would love to do many other things; it would love to tinker with other things and put its fingers in lots of different pies. However, I ask it to come back to its core activity. Its job is to protect the public. That is the job of the Government as well. I would be very interested to know how we got into the current position, when the review will be published and whether the Government are likely to implement in the near future the recommendations that were made to them 10 years ago.

11.59 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Dawn Primarolo): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon) on securing the debate. He is very knowledgeable about the subject. He appreciates the complexity and range of the issues involved in protecting the public. He understands which issues fall into the remit of the Health Protection Agency, environmental health, local authorities or food protection. I agree with him about the importance of the work of public analysts in protecting consumers and preserving public health. The FSA is addressing that with the

future career structures and qualifications for the service. I will come back to that because he raised a number of questions on that, as did my other hon. Friends.

Dr. Iddon: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I will, but I have hardly started.

Dr. Iddon: Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Royal Society of Chemistry, which is responsible for validating the MChemA, will be consulted? My understanding is that, as of today, it has not been consulted.

Dawn Primarolo: I give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance on that. If he will allow me, I will deliver my speech in two parts. I will first discuss the importance of public analysis and the work that is going on, look forward to what else the service could do and consider the types of qualifications we would need. The second half will deal specifically with the role of the pre-eminent qualification, which will remain pre-eminent, and the consultation that needs to take place. I will also pick up on comments made by other hon. Members.

As has been mentioned, there are currently about 900,000 cases a year of food-borne disease in the UK. Every year, about 500 people die because of what they have eaten. As my hon. Friend said, new challenges over food safety have developed over the past few decades. As production methods, supply chains and food technologies have evolved, the response required has become much more complex. The approaches needed to reduce health risks from contamination or adulteration and to protect consumers are becoming increasingly specialised. We must ensure that the claims made by food producers are subject to robust scientific scrutiny. The contributions of all hon. Members have focused on how we can take that forward and ensure that it continues.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, European law states that the FSA must designate official control laboratories to carry out analysis of official control samples. It is true that we have seen a significant reduction in laboratory numbers since the mid-1950s. It is also true that the volume of work commissioned by local authorities has fallen considerably. The FSA has investigated and continues to investigate those matters. It advises me that the current level of laboratory provision is adequate. I think my hon. Friend will agree with the caveat that comparing the services of the 1950s and today is not comparing like with like. There are several reasons for that because the service has evolved in recent years.

First and foremost, the UK has moved from a scatter-gun approach to sampling to a more targeted and risk-based approach. As my hon. Friend is aware, in the past local authorities traditionally operated independently of each other. They selected a shopping basket of products for sampling based on local concerns. That meant that authorities in adjoining areas could have run tests on products from exactly the same source. As a crude example, several local authorities could conceivably have sampled food coming from the same warehouse at the same time and using the same manufacturing process. What happens now is that local authorities co-ordinate their efforts through the food liaison group run by the Local Authorities Co-ordinators of Regulatory Services, which established a national sampling programme and shares evidence. That reduces duplication between councils. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) described with reference to his constituency, that has led in some areas to an amalgamation of laboratories to give critical mass and make it possible to take the work forward.

Mr. Kidney: Does my right hon. Friend accept the statistic that some local authorities carried out no sampling at all in an entire year, and is she prepared to say that that means there was no risk in those areas?

Dawn Primarolo: I am saying that with the mechanism for areas to share information—my hon. Friend gave examples about the combination of authorities—information can be shared for the purpose of prevention. I do not underestimate the importance of sampling, but I am trying to describe a system of information-sharing and an approach that ensures information is shared.

Mr. Illsley: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: May I just finish my point, as I want to make sure that I answer the important points that were raised about how to take things forward? There are still misunderstandings about what is intended, and I want to put those to rest so that we can proceed with exactly the type of agenda that my hon. Friend set out.

Mr. Illsley: My right hon. Friend referred to a national sampling programme, and what she said is an argument for a national system, in which the work is taken away from the local authorities and given to a national body, which would co-ordinate sampling throughout the country.

Dawn Primarolo: That may be so, but under the current law local authorities have dealt with the matter, and they want to keep the power. The analysts are not public sector analysts—I believe there are four or five and the rest are in the private sector. They are independent of those requesting the sample and those for whom the sampling is done. There are important reasons for that independence, and we need to think carefully about how it works. As to their future role, I want to give examples in a moment of additional qualifications that might be suitable; that may offer a way forward. As well as boosting efficiency, the organisation, through the co-ordination of local authorities, can reduce work load.

Mike Penning: The Minister is being generous in giving way.

I accept that we do not want duplication, and that, if a manufacturer is producing something that will go to different areas, co-ordination is perfectly right for that. However, that does not address the role of local authorities in relation to small restaurants in their jurisdiction. It is not applicable. In areas where there are no inspections at all, it is not a question of doing things in a co-ordinated way; it is a question of nothing at all happening in relation to smaller cases. As the hon. Member for Stafford asked, how can places be safe, if they are not being tested?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman raises a separate question about the food protection role across all local authority and central Government functions. I am trying to give an answer about something that I think is very important—I want to answer the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East asked, specifically about the role and qualifications of analysts and how the Government see those developing.

Norman Lamb: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I will give way once more, and then I shall try to make some progress. I am trying to be delicate in ensuring that hon. Members know what we are, and are not, talking about.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Much of what she says about co-ordination between local authorities, the sharing of resources and so forth makes sense. However, the Association of Public Analysts believes that judgments about sampling are not always based on an assessment of risk but based on financial constraints. Given that those concerns are being raised by the professional body, is she prepared to consider further its fear that judgments are not based on risk alone but that financial issues are involved, and would she pick up on my suggestion of a meeting?

Dawn Primarolo: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that many people seek to advise Ministers. They do so from their particular perspective, and the Minister has to put all those views on the table. I rely on the advice of the Food Standards Agency. Hon. Members are asking whether there is a risk to public health and whether we have the facilities necessary to ensure that all arrangements are discharged. On that point, the FSA is in regular contact. I shall deal later with the consultation and the future, as many other important points have been made in that connection, but it seems to me that that is the proper place for such discussions to take place and for proposals to be made to me as Minister. That is my clear steer to the FSA, and I shall say what it is and how I see it going forward in answer to the points raised by hon. Members.

Another thing has changed dramatically: developments have put the onus on food business operators to ensure that they discharge their obligations. Inevitably, that will result in other requirements. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East knows, manufacturers are required by law to identify situations where food safety issues may arise and to establish measures to address them. They must keep records to confirm that suitable monitoring has taken place, and they have a legal responsibility to notify the FSA about actual or suspected threats to the safety or quality of food.

My hon. Friend said that dioxin had recently been found in pork. He will know that the food producers and the retail system enabled us, in partnership with the FSA, to identify immediately where their products come from, whether or not there was a problem, and take them off the shelf. That happened very speedily. At the heart of it was the protection of the consumer. As a result, local authorities have a far more exacting way in which to target sampling. They need the flexibility to decide for themselves how to invest, but we must ensure that everything fits together to give an enforcement service that delivers exactly what we need, regardless of whether we have national sampling or protection laws.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) spoke of testing, but I want to give an example when national testing would completely take over. He mentioned the E. coli bug. All the necessary work was done by public health bodies, not public analysts, and the microbiology was funded by the Department of Health. As I said, calling them public analysts is a bit of a red herring; it does not necessarily mean that they are public. Four or five of them are from local authorities, and the rest are commercial private sector bodies.

I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, but the bottom line is that local authorities are responsible in law for ensuring that all food for sale in their area is fit for consumption, and the FSA audits local authorities to assess their implementation and enforcement of food law. The agency advises me that it has found no evidence of local authorities failing in their statutory duty. Obviously, if it found a failing, it would take action against the local authorities. If my hon. Friends fear that there are, or if they know of, examples in their area, I invite them to make representations to me so that I can double-check that they have been investigated fully.

I should like to reassure my hon. Friends that the FSA is monitoring the decline in the number of laboratories, and there is an open door to take action if it finds evidence that standards are slipping and that food safety is compromised. However, the agency advises me that all the evidence suggests that a local market-based approach is working.

I shall now turn to the important points that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East made on recruitment and standards in the service, as I said I would. I think he agrees that we face a considerable recruitment challenge and, as he pointed out, two thirds of practising analysts are over the age of 50. It is therefore extremely important that we encourage more people to go into the service, particularly gifted young scientists and graduates. The FSA is working to try to have a clear career path in place for prospective and new entrants. That is why it is working with the APA to improve, for example, the information that is available on its website on the types of jobs available. The agency is also making a funding contribution to the APA's training programme. However, as I think we all agree, we need more radical solutions. We need to get fresh blood into the profession, but we also need to look at the challenges that we expect the service to face, which have been mentioned.

As my hon. Friend stated, the European regulation states that food analysis must be carried out by a suitably qualified and experienced member of staff, which is far less prescriptive than the Food Safety Act 1990. That led the FSA to think about whether it needed to change the law in the UK to bring it in line with Europe.

I want to explain how that might be taken forward, but at the outset I wish to make absolutely crystal clear the immense respect for the masters of chemical analysis qualification. It is not my place to comment on whether the degree should be upgraded to a doctorate—as my hon. Friend said, that is for the RSC to advise on—but I am happy to put it on the record that I believe that the

MChemA should remain the pre-eminent qualification. At the moment, the FSA is exploring whether it should be the only viable qualification. It is not about downgrading a qualification. We need not only to respond to the decline in numbers and to attract fresh blood, but to consider other comparable qualifications that could be appropriate, and whether we need to develop a tiered approach, by which the MChemA remains the top-ranking qualification but other qualifications would allow a person to take a significantly different role in the service. Let me give an example. The university of Stirling is the world leader on irradiated food, which people are concerned about, but it does not offer the MChemA qualification, so it cannot be within the service.

In the consultation with the Royal Society and others, we need to consider the type of analytical outcomes and sampling programmes that we want, and whether it might be possible to appoint others for testing to specific standards. We must also consider what type of proposals would help laboratories to develop expertise in set areas and would open up the potential for guaranteed work in specific areas of food testing, possibly encouraging others to come into that area. That is what we are concentrating on, and that is what I expect the FSA to concentrate on.

We are considering options and putting them on the table, and the FSA is looking into them. I agree with my hon. Friend that consultation is crucial, and not just with the APA, but with the Royal Society as well. I am more than happy to set up for him, and other hon. Members who are interested, a direct meeting with those in the FSA leading the review. That would be as well as, not instead of, the consultation with other organisations that will go ahead as is right and proper. The next step needs to be to look closely at that, and at the proposals, and to ensure that we have a clear way forward. My hon. Friend may also be interested to know that following a recent food law enforcement practitioners meeting, it was agreed that these matters would be considered and taken forward. Again, I am more than happy to ensure that he has the details on that in order to engage in that discussion.

I want to make it clear to every hon. Member present that we feel it is absolutely imperative to maintain the highest standard of food control, but there are challenges ahead. Of course, we should not downgrade the pre-eminent qualification in this science, but we need to consider whether others could bring skills into the service. We also need to consider how the service will be co-ordinated, going forward, for all the reasons that my hon. Friends have identified. At the same time, we must make sure, as I will be doing after the debate, that the FSA keeps a very close eye on the work that is going on in local authorities and nationally to give the assurance that all hon. Members have sought that food safety is of the highest priority, and that legal obligations to protect the consumer and ensure that food is fit for human consumption will continue to be enforced with great rigour. In that way, we can take the service forward. I do not accept that it is in a state of crisis, but I do accept that we need to act quickly to secure its continued work and commitment in this area. I hope that, with those assurances, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East will take some comfort from today's debate. The matter is not closed, and it certainly is not about doing down a qualification.

Dr. Iddon: Will my right hon. Friend say something about the review group that met two years ago and has still not reported its findings? That was also an issue that concerned other hon. Members.

Dawn Primarolo: The reporting by the review group will be brought together with the current consultations about the service. I accept the point that my hon. Friend and others have made. It would certainly help those in the field if there were a clearer statement of intent from the Food Standards Agency and Ministers. I accept that many of the questions that have been asked, and fears that have been raised, are because of a lack of information and a clear road map going forward. I will certainly take the matter away and ensure that it is dealt with. That could be part of the discussion that my hon. Friend has with his colleagues when I facilitate the meeting that I promised.

Mike Penning: Will the Minister explain why none of the recommendations of the review, which took place 10 years ago, has been implemented? Not a single one! How can we have any confidence going forward if the Government have not implemented the recommendations from the last review?

Dawn Primarolo: As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, the last review was conducted 10 years ago, before the formation of the Food Standards Agency. When the FSA was formed, it was recognised as an enormous step forward in the protection of the consumer and in ensuring food safety. Many of those issues would have been to do with that process. Although this is a matter that I was not familiar with at the time—I was in another Department—I speculate that in setting up the FSA itself, the focus on the review and some of the issues that were around before the FSA's existence were ones that were not actively taken forward at that time. The crucial issue is that the FSA continually discharges its duties with regard to the protection of the consumer.

Mike Penning: Rather than speculate, will the Minister be kind enough to write to me and let me know what was and was not implemented?

Dawn Primarolo: I am more than happy to do that. I was trying to avoid the catch-all phrase, "I will write to the hon. Gentleman." I think that I am not too far wide of the mark in my suggestion to him, but I am happy to write to him.

In conclusion, this has been a very helpful debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and all the hon. Members who have spoken. It is crucial that our constituents have confidence in food safety and the food that they purchase as citizens. As science and skills develop and as the production of food evolves, we need to ensure that we have the very best structures and qualified service to continue to protect our citizens. That is certainly the brief that I have given to the FSA.

Small Businesses (HBOS)

12.30 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) (Con) *rose—*

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. Unusually, the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) and the Minister have agreed that a number of other speakers can participate. The hon. Members whose names I have and whom I will allow to speak are the hon. Members for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) and for Wantage (Mr. Vaizey). Any other hon. Members who want to speak will have to do so in an intervention because we really must leave the Minister time to respond to the comments that are made. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that any individuals about whom they make comments will not have any redress, because of the absolute privilege that exists in this Chamber.

Mr. Paice: Thank you very much, Mr. Taylor. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue. I am also grateful to my many right hon. and hon. Friends who have joined me. As you rightly said, it will be a challenge to get everyone in in a 30-minute debate, so I will move swiftly on to the meat of the issue.

The debate revolves around a number of businesses whose affairs were handled by the Reading office of HBOS, under the management of a Mr. Lynden Scourfield, until early 2007. The issue was the subject of a BBC investigation for "File on 4", which was broadcast on Tuesday 26 May.

Let me say that this is not about Government policy, and I have had a brief conversation with the Minister. There is evidence not only that the bank's own regulatory controls failed, but that the Financial Services Authority should have been informed. In at least some cases, there is evidence to justify criminal investigations. The objective of the debate is to persuade the Minister to undertake to present the issue to the regulatory authorities for a full and exhaustive examination.

The issue was first raised with me by my constituents Mr. and Mrs. Turner, but it soon became obvious that theirs was just one of many businesses in the same position, and some of those other businesses are represented by colleagues here today. My remarks will deal partially with the Turners, but I have further evidence to present to impress the seriousness of the issue on hon. Members.

Before I do, however, I want to make two preliminary points. The first is the point that you have just made, Mr. Taylor. This is the first time in my 22 years as a Member of the House that I have intentionally used parliamentary privilege to raise an issue, and I certainly do not intend to abuse that right. Secondly, I do not pretend to know the financial details of my constituents' business or any other business, or the business competence of any of those involved, but the issues that I want to raise go beyond that. As I shall show, Lynden Scourfield was responsible for making what may or may not have been poor financial positions into impossible ones, and in doing so probably enriched himself and others.

In July 2003, the Turners' business, which was called Zenith, had a £50,000 overdraft. The Turners submitted a business plan to HBOS in Cambridge requesting funding of £450,000, of which £160,000 would be under the small firms loan guarantee scheme. In August, the scheme aspect was approved, but HBOS Cambridge referred the overall request to its credit department, which, it transpired, meant moving the request to Reading.

In April 2004, the Turners met Lynden Scourfield, who agreed funding on the condition that Zenith engaged and paid Quayside Corporate Services. As a result, new business plans were submitted requiring more borrowing. By January 2006, the Turners had had enough and asked the bank to stop imposing Quayside on them.

By August 2006, the bank had started proceedings to evict the Turners from their home, which had earlier been provided as security. However, only one month later, in September, Lynden Scourfield agreed to increase their borrowing facility to £856,000. By November 2006, Scourfield told the Turners to fund the business by using corporate credit cards at £12,000 a month, which he would authorise.

On 21 March 2007, the Turners were due to meet Mr. Scourfield in Reading. The meeting was cancelled, and his office told them that he was on indefinite leave but that they would be seen by a new man, who was cutting off all lines of credit to more than 200 of Lynden Scourfield's customers.

I will not go through all the subsequent events, other than to make two points. First, the eviction proceedings continued, including two court hearings. District Judge Pelly said,

"having heard what I have heard, on any basis it would be grossly inequitable for the warrant to proceed. There must be time for this to be resolved, and on the balance of probability I think once it has been resolved, the Turners will almost certainly have sufficient wherewithal to pay off all these arrears in a reasonable time."

Secondly, the Turner family were concerned that HBOS had broken the rules of the small firms loan guarantee scheme by using it to pay off existing overdrafts, which is strictly forbidden. That has been referred to the financial ombudsman, who is yet to make a final decision. Since then, other examples of the apparent abuse of the scheme by HBOS have emerged from other businesses, all of which have expressed no confidence in the independence of the financial ombudsman service.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I think that there is a common cause. A constituent of mine was involved with a business called Chauffair. In 2002, a rescue package with business men to make the company work was stopped by HBOS and Mr. Scourfield. Quayside was brought in. Two companies and five years later, the original debt of about £14 million that was covered by assets has risen to £113 million and the money has disappeared.

Mr. Paice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is quoting just one of a number of similar examples.

In March 2008, the Turners approached me and I started to correspond with HBOS. By then, it was apparent that all these other businesses were involved. By December 2008, five colleagues and I wrote to Lord Stevenson, who was then the chairman of HBOS. The key part of our letter stated:

"All of our constituents were granted increased loans by Mr Lynden Scourfield whilst he was an employee of HBOS; an employment which was apparently terminated abruptly.

All loans were granted on the basis that the businesses employed Quayside Corporate Services as advisers for substantial fees which clearly could be ill afforded.

In most if not all cases borrowing was increased considerably as a result of Quayside's recommendation and approved by Mr. Scourfield.

We take the view that there is more than coincidence involved here and that our constituents have been ill-served by your bank."

We sought a meeting with Lord Stevenson.

After the changes in HBOS at the end of last year, we met Mr. Philip Grant, the chief operating officer of Bank of Scotland Corporate. In a letter to me and my colleagues dated 18 February this year, he stated that the bank

"does not agree with the implications drawn in the specific points that you and your colleagues have raised."

Pertinently, he stated:

"In certain instances, Mr Scourfield was instrumental in the appointment of Quayside Corporate Services…as consultants to the entities in which the constituents were involved. So far as I am aware, there is no evidence that anybody at the bank knew, at that time,"—

I stress those words—

"that the reputation of Quayside (or of individuals within Quayside) was, in any way, questionable.

In early 2007, the bank identified issues concerning Mr Scourfield's approach to lending. As pointed out above, the Bank was more supportive than it should have been in responding to requests for increased facilities from some of the customers in question. After Mr Scourfield had been suspended from duty on account of these matters, he resigned in April 2007.

Following communication between the Bank and the FSA, improved procedures were implemented to ensure that there was no recurrence of those practices. To be clear, these procedures were designed to ensure that, in future, the Bank did not lend more than it should to its customers.

Following Mr Scourfield's departure, the Bank carried out an extensive internal review and concluded that there was a lack of evidence of direct personal benefit on the part of Mr Scourfield from his relationship with Quayside."

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the tremendous lead he has given to colleagues in this matter. Does he agree that in the last point, the gradual sweeping of dirt under the carpet can be heard? The relationship between Mr. Scourfield and Quayside was not healthy. This man was an employee of HBOS. Remnant Media Ltd in my constituency has suffered from the bad decisions and I expect the bank to stand up to the problem.

Mr. Paice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree with his conclusion. I, and my colleagues, have stressed to HBOS and Mr. Grant that whether or not Mr. Scourfield was acting properly, he was acting in the name of the bank, and the fact is, therefore, that the bank must accept responsibility for those actions. In the letter to which I referred, Mr. Grant went on to make specific comments and, in some cases, some "without prejudice" offers on the five cases that we had represented. In the case of my constituents—the Turners—the offer was, at that stage, very small. My colleagues and I rejected those offers and returned to the main issues. On 18 March, Mr. Grant substantially increased the offer to the Turners, dismissed one of the other cases and made a small offer for one more. However, there was a complete refusal to accept any criticism of the bank. Subsequently, a number of the businesses met and agreed to reject all the offers by HBOS, because they wanted acceptance by the bank of the apparent malpractice and the full investigation that we seek.

That brings me to the present situation, excluding last week's radio programme. Since then, of course, more cases have come to light. Mr Karl Capp of Orchard Networks raised the same issues as the Turners about the small firms loan guarantee. As it happens, another of my constituents, called Mark Turner—no relation, as I understand it—has told me of a similar story: he was required by HBOS to engage Quayside Leisure at £6,000 a month. The business still went into administration and—unbelievably—the bank then told the administrators to employ Quayside to run the business. I have also received correspondence from a solicitor representing a Mr. Clive Collins. This is very important because it comes from a solicitor. He wrote:

"I am presently acting for an individual, Clive Collins, whose business was taken away from him by HBOS and placed in the hands of Quayside. Quayside invoiced vast sums for doing very little work. They effectively asset-stripped the company until it could no longer trade. The business's main asset, a subsidiary company, was then sold to a different company owned by the directors of Quayside for £100,000, despite much higher offers made by independent third parties."

And he continues in a similar vain.

Finally, I want to refer to a company called Seoul Nassau, which, I am told, went down for £34 million owed to HBOS. It is alleged by someone who worked for the company's owner, in a letter that we received, that the owner's personal assistant would

"deliver a briefcase full of cash to Mr. Scourfield to assist the loan".

This allegation follows other stories that Mr. Scourfield was benefiting from being, as the bank said, "overly supportive", including, I am afraid, lurid stories of prostitutes being paid for from the funds of Quayside clients. I am well aware that a number of these allegations cannot be substantiated to any great degree, but to be clear I have not repeated many further allegations for which I could find no evidence at all, but which might still have some substance.

I have received personal assurances from somebody whom I know very well and trust about the integrity of Mr. David Mills, who is the owner of Quayside, and who, in some cases, was the nominee director of HBOS. I have also seen the correspondence between Mr. Mills and the BBC regarding these various allegations. I shall not go through all the points that he made, but I fear that his record of the situation does not tally with the information that the BBC has obtained and which refutes some of his suggestions. In particular, I want to quote from Mr. Mills' e-mail to the BBC:

"Lynden Scourfield fell ill at the outset of 2006 and resigned from the bank some months afterwards—he was not fired as the Turners have repeatedly alleged".

As I have said, that does not conform with the bank's own statement that Mr. Scourfield

"had been suspended from duty on account of these matters",

and that he resigned while he was suspended.

My basic contention is that Lynden Scourfield lent considerable sums to more than 200 businesses and that in many, if not most, cases he required the businesses to engage Quayside as advisers or turnaround specialists. In many cases, he also required that a Quayside appointee be placed on the board. Then Quayside would advise

[Mr. Paice]

significant increases in borrowing, which Scourfield authorised and in which the business owners acquiesced, as, after all, that was the advice of the bank's appointees. Subsequently, many of those businesses went down for far more than if Quayside had not been involved, and the assets of the businesses were acquired in one way or another by others involved with Quayside.

Certain important questions arise from all those points. First, will the Government investigate the operation of the small firms loan guarantee scheme to ensure that banks are not abusing it? Why was Lynden Scourfield allowed to keep lending money to businesses that were already overborrowed, especially if, as we believe, he was lending sums considerably in excess of his authorised limit? What happened to the bank's internal procedures?

Given the allegations about Mr. Scourfield and the charges that he was bribed, why were the police not informed, especially in the light of the bank comment that refers only to a lack of evidence? Why were the regulatory authorities not brought into the investigation by HBOS, as I believe they were required to be? Why was HBOS the only bank not to work with Institute for Turnaround specialists, given that Quayside, almost unbelievably, was not a member of the institute? If everything was satisfactory, why did HBOS stop using Quayside?

Finally, should there not be clear rules that if a consultancy is involved with a business that goes down, no company or individual involved with the consultancy should then benefit by purchasing the company or its assets, which clearly appears to have happened?

I hope that this debate demonstrates to the Minister that he should invite the regulatory authorities to investigate the whole matter thoroughly. The public now own most of HBOS, and, although there were many reasons for its decline, it seems clear to me that some of its losses, probably hundreds of millions, stemmed from malpractice at the Reading office. All of us are taxpayers, and we are justified in demanding to know how that happened, why it was allowed to happen and whether any criminality was involved. If we have a full inquiry that proves all my statements, allegations and concerns groundless, I will, of course, accept the finding and withdraw them. However, on the evidence that I have seen, I believe that an inquiry would find otherwise.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

David Taylor (in the Chair): Order. I shall call the Minister at precisely 12.54. There are three speakers, and I shall interrupt them at the end of two minutes. I named them at the start. I call Dr. Andrew Murrison.

12.47 pm

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Taylor.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on the leadership that he has shown in this matter. My interest derives from my constituent Mr. Andrew Reade who has been discommoded in connection with his business Keenets by the gross failure in governance at HBOS and by its associate Quayside in the manner that has already been so well described.

It is simply not credible to characterise Reading-based official Lynden Scourfield as some autonomous rogue banker and leave the matter at that. Loans of that order must have been sanctioned and remitted at a much higher level—in this case, at HBOS headquarters in Edinburgh by Mr. Scourfield's immediate superior at least.

Lloyds Banking Group has pretty well dismissed all criticism and played lip service to cleaning up the act of its acquisition HBOS. That simply will not do. It is unedifying in the current climate of distrust in greedy, cynical bankers for Lloyds Banking Group to behave in that way.

It is evident that Mr. Lynden Scourfield had a close relationship with Quayside's Mr. Bancroft and Mr. Mills. One wonders at that and also at the tales of the high life apparently lived by key players in the tragedy that were revealed in last week's "File on 4" documentary. There can be little doubt that, at the behest of Quayside and its expensively imposed but seemingly unsuccessful turnaround directors, many struggling companies were obliged to extend their loans, ultimately causing ruinous losses not just for them but for a bank that is now in receipt of a large sum of public money.

What remains opaque is the extent to which those now liquidated companies were acquired by undertakings associated with Quayside. From his Keenets experience, my constituent suggests that the Quayside-associated companies Seoul Nassau and Speyside should be explored by the Financial Services Authority in that regard. Given the apparent murkiness of the situation, there is every reason for the FSA to undertake a comprehensive investigation, and I urge the Minister to use his good offices to ensure that that happens.

12.49 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I am here because of my concern about the actions of HBOS and the company that it engaged. I am here because of my constituent Joanne Freer. Her company, Cotton Bottoms, was affected when it sought a loan from HBOS of £400,000 in 2003. The money came with strings: the company had to engage Quayside Corporate Services and it had to make Michael Bancroft a non-executive director and a member of the board.

A series of events then occurred. Mr. Bancroft charged exorbitant fees, which were paid in preference to supplier payments; that damaged the company's relationship with those suppliers. He also enforced redundancies against the wishes of my constituent. Finally, in a fait accompli, he pushed my constituent into selling the business through his bullying behaviour. In the end, she had to agree not to take legal action against HBOS or Michael Bancroft, or else she would have lost everything.

The bank has not explained satisfactorily why Lynden Scourfield, who authorised the loans and enforced the appointment, has left the bank. It should do so. The bank itself has clearly suffered serious losses, but so have individual businesses. Serious allegations, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), need to be investigated. Those allegations concern the agreement that appears to have been made between Quayside Corporate Services

and Lynden Scourfield at HBOS, which allowed them to take control of highly geared vulnerable businesses in order to divide the board and seize control, then submitting false business plans to facilitate further borrowing, channelled through Quayside Corporate Services with fees, only to collapse the business months or years later to the detriment of the owners, shareholders and creditors—and of HBOS itself.

I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that the authorities properly investigate what I regard as a most serious matter.

12.51 pm

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I speak on behalf of my constituent, Mr. Justin Riggs, a poultry farmer. He has travelled here from Stanford in the Vale today to hear our debate in person.

Mr. Riggs—with hindsight, most unfortunately—took out a £375,000 loan with HBOS in 2004. He was another of those business men who ended up dealing with Lynden Scourfield and the Reading office. The bank called in the loan in August 2007. By then, the loan had grown to £382,000, despite the fact that Mr. Riggs had paid the bank a total of £231,000 in interest, charges and other fees.

Mr. Scourfield behaved in a similar fashion: he forced Mr. Riggs to engage a business adviser—in this case, a Mr. Crawshaw—who advised him to sell not only some of his land, from which he gained income, but some of his chicken houses. As a result of that advice, which Mr. Riggs felt inclined to follow, he saw a 25 per cent. drop in income. To add insult to injury, when the bank came to foreclose on Mr. Riggs, it levied charges of £40,000.

The bank has conceded, if not in principle at least morally, that it should not have levied those charges, and has agreed to waive them. However, it is astonishing, not least to my colleagues, that it should have taken a legalistic view of its proceedings, not recognising that there is a pattern in the way that Mr. Scourfield engaged with numerous people—including Mr. Karl Capp, who was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) and is another of my constituents, and who had trouble with the small firms loan guarantee scheme.

Mr. Scourfield has taken businesses and loaded them with loans, charges and consultancy fees. It is now up to HBOS to come to the table, following a moral course rather than a legalistic one, and put those people back in the position that they would have been in before dealing with HBOS.

12.53 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ian Pearson): I congratulate the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) on securing today's debate, and I thank him for his contribution. He raised particular concerns about the practices of Halifax Bank of Scotland at its Reading office, and particularly about one individual and a company that provide advisory support.

It is not appropriate for me to intervene directly in individual cases or disputes, not least once legal proceedings have been started. Legal disputes are for the courts to determine. That said, I am of course deeply concerned to hear the allegations that have been made.

In the difficult times that we are experiencing, it is vital that banks do all they reasonably can to support corporate customers who are in financial difficulty and to work with them to manage and resolve their financial difficulties. Evidently, however, there are other issues at stake. It is clear that a number of firms that were handled by the Reading office failed, and that the situation was made worse by a breach of approved lending limits. I shall return to the general issue of inappropriate risk-taking by banks in a moment, if I have time.

I have been advised that the FSA has investigated the Reading office case and the internal breach of controls that occurred at HBOS. The control systems have been changed and strengthened, and HBOS has written off a considerable amount, although one or two cases remain in dispute. I have also been advised that the FSA continues to monitor HBOS, that it considers carefully any allegations of fraud by an authorised firm, and that it works closely with other law enforcement agencies to protect consumers from financial crime. I add, however, that it is important that any victim of an alleged fraud should report the matter to his or her local police force.

Following the hon. Gentleman's representations, I shall write to the FSA, enclosing a transcript of this debate, to seek assurance that all appropriate consideration is given to these matters. I shall also ask it to write to me and the hon. Gentleman to outline the FSA's role in dealing with this affair and the approach that it takes when there may have been financial crime. I also undertake to write to other hon. Members who have attended the debate.

Sir Paul Beresford: Is the Minister prepared to add the documentation in which many people have set out quite clearly what has happened, particularly as some of them have been severely hurt? The lady whom I have mentioned is not homeless, but is living on benefits, has lost her home and is now a single parent.

Ian Pearson: I am happy to pass on any documentation to the FSA that will help it fully to assess and examine this matter.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire spoke about the use of public funds in the Government's loan guarantee scheme. I understand that HBOS has not made a claim to the Government under the terms of the scheme, so no Government funds are involved. The scheme, which is being replaced by the enterprise finance guarantee, is delivered by a range of approved lenders who are responsible for all decisions on individual loans. Any allegations of misuse by lenders are obviously of concern to the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform. Its partner, Capital for Enterprise Ltd, manages the scheme. CfEL examines allegations as part of a programme of oversight, and it may require the lender to modify its procedures for the scheme if anything inappropriate is found. I am assured that relevant procedures are in place.

The debate has raised issues and allegations that require full examination of the evidence, and I am happy to pass on any evidence that is not already available to the FSA. If appropriate, I am also happy for the FSA to refer matters to the police. The debate has also touched on wider issues of corporate governance and regulation in banks, particularly in relation to

[Ian Pearson]

risk-taking. The boards of banks must ensure that they maintain systems and controls that are appropriate to their businesses and in line with relevant regulations. Their nature depends on the scale and complexity of the business, on its structure and the physical location of its operations, and on the degree of risk associated with them. The rules require firms to carry out regular reviews of their control systems, and to have clear reporting lines and management responsibilities. In particular, the duties of individuals and departments should be segregated to reduce the opportunity for financial crime or rule breaches.

Clearly, lessons have been learned from this case, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire for raising these issues. We must all work together on the wider issues to ensure that we learn lessons. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Turner review and its report and recommendations. The Government are committed to taking forward the issues that Turner identified. We must also consider where improvements can be made more generally to banks' corporate business, but in a way that supports the flow of credit to consumers and businesses. I shall ensure that the FSA writes to the hon. Gentleman, and we will write to other hon. Members when we have some responses.

Cancer Survivors

1 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley) (Lab): I am delighted to be able to raise this subject today, and I am particularly pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister is here to reply.

I became interested in this subject, and sought to introduce the debate, because it probably has not had as much discussion in this place as it should have had. In fact, it is a condition of success—many more people are surviving cancer treatment and live beyond the time that we would have expected them to survive only 10 years ago. It is almost a good problem to have, but it needs addressing.

I first became aware of the problem not only in my career as a nurse, but when the excellent Macmillan Cancer Support reception was held in the Palace. The first person that I walked into was Dr. Andreyev. He was very enthusiastic about ensuring that this problem was brought to the fore, and that cancer survivors who suffer problems after treatment are dealt with properly. I pay tribute to him, because he ensured that I am introducing this debate today.

I suppose that the worst news is when we are told of a diagnosis of cancer. That can only be overcome when someone is told by a consultant that their cancer is clear, that the treatment has worked, and that they can go out and enjoy their life. However, for 50 per cent. of people who are treated, particularly for those who are treated abdominally for a cancer, that is not possible. For them, conditions will be in place that will change their life for ever. Many of their symptoms can be severe.

I am told that there are 2 million cancer survivors and that every year an extra 3.2 per cent. live following a diagnosis of and treatment for cancer. They will have done extremely well to overcome the psychological, emotional and physical problems of the cancer but, as I said, for some that is not the end of the story.

By its nature, treatment for cancer is tough. It is tough to endure and drastic. It can involve surgery or radiotherapy, and incredibly invasive drugs are used in chemotherapy. As fantastic as those drugs are, it is difficult for the body to absorb them. The problem with radiotherapy is that the treatments are concentrated on the organ that is affected. I have two of the companies that produce linear accelerators, Elekta and Varian, in Crawley. They produce the most amazing machines, which are accurate beyond our wildest dreams of even five years ago, but no matter how good they are, other organs can be affected, including the bowel and the bladder, which can lead to problems later in life. Lifelong treatment is necessary for many people.

The big problem is that people who have survived cancer feel reluctant to complain because it may seem to them that they are being ungrateful. Although they have been treated and are free from their cancer, they might have symptoms such as urinary or faecal incontinence, yet they think, "I can't complain about this. I'm so grateful to the NHS for treating me and making me well that I would feel bad about complaining." Nevertheless, we need to come clean on this matter and ensure that we

allow people the right to come to the NHS with their post-treatment concerns and get the treatment that they need.

Some 80 per cent. of people experience changes, and 50 per cent. of those will experience significant changes, such as urinary or faecal incontinence and painful and disabling oedema. As hon. Members will be aware, women who are treated for breast cancer often suffer from lymph oedema in their arms, which is incredibly difficult to deal with. It may be a schoolboyish thing to laugh about, but people can also suffer from extreme flatulence. We can only imagine how disastrous it is for someone who has been treated for cancer—say cervical cancer—with radiotherapy and then finds that they suffer from such a distressing condition. Their whole life may be altered because they are worried about going outside and having a social life.

Disfigurement from surgery is also a problem. Surgery is often extreme, and after it a person may feel that they are not good to look at, which means that their personal and sexual relationships are affected. I could mention many other things, but I am sure that hon. Members are aware of the conditions that I am talking about.

What can we do about such conditions? We are extremely grateful that people are surviving, and yet we have not paid enough attention to the fact that treatment and care are also needed to help with the after-effects. That is why I was so glad to meet gastroenterologist Dr. Andreyev. He is the only specialist working in the UK who deals with the post-radiation effects on people after they have been treated. He is unique, and is in a position to undertake research. He is gathering around him a team of professionals comprising dieticians, medical students and nurses to do the research into such conditions. How can those conditions be alleviated when the treatments are undertaken? Is it possible that diet may help? If diet is changed during radiotherapy, will it help to ensure that the bowel is not so adversely affected? Moreover, the team is doing lots of other research to try to reduce the thickening of the wall of the bowel during treatment, to prevent problems later. Unquestionably, all such projects cost money. However, today's debate is not just about calling for money—it would be easy to hold such a debate and do so—but about ensuring that everyone is aware of the problems. Cancer networks around the country should consider having a specialist working alongside them when they plan individual patients' cancer treatment. I believe that that would make an enormous difference to many people.

The second thing that I want is for people to have the space and time to declare their conditions and be honest and open about them. They should not feel that because they have had treatment, they do not deserve to be treated for the after-effects of cancer treatment.

This is a debate to raise the awareness of such issues and to talk about the work of both the Royal Marsden hospital and Dr. Andreyev. Dr. Andreyev has produced an excellent booklet that is written in plain English, which is a great relief to many people, that details just what is required to reduce the symptoms of cancer treatment. It is always important to be able to share those experiences. I am aware of organisations and self-help groups around the country that enable people to come together to share their experiences. It must feel to sufferers that such a subject is difficult to speak out loud about. It is always good to talk to others who have suffered from the same conditions. I am aware of those groups around the country and I know what comfort, help and advice they give to people.

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. A group called Fighting Against Cancer Together—FACT—has been set up in my constituency. It consists of three women who have all survived cancer—Leslie Shaw, Judith Williamson and Joanne Smith—and who felt exactly how my hon. Friend described. They felt isolated, and they did not know what to do or understand the language being used. However, together they have set up this group to encourage other people and say, "Look, we are here to help." Next week, as part of their work, they will visit a school to teach young kids about cancer and the dangers of sunburn. Such grass-roots work is really important.

Laura Moffatt: I am delighted to have taken that intervention, because I know of such groups around the country. When I first raised this debate, I was inundated with e-mails from many different organisations, and I am so pleased to hear about FACT. I want to convey what such organisations have been doing. It is the same for survivors of children's cancer, too. Some amazing work is being done to help children to get over that process. However, in the short time available to me, it is important to concentrate on some of the physical and emotional problems that come from particular treatments of cancers in the abdominal area.

Organisations have been set up to assist sufferers. There is nothing better than people being able to share their experiences. A shining example is provided by the work of Dr. Andreyev and the Royal Marsden hospital. He is embedded at the heart of the team treating people with cancer, giving advice and helping to direct the treatment in the right way. Obviously, I want that replicated. I am not even sure that that would take a huge amount of money, although it would take a lot of thought by cancer networks to incorporate specialists, such as Dr. Andreyev, in their planning for people's treatment and care. Organisation can make this possible. The cancer network system has been one of the best things to happen to cancer treatment in the United Kingdom. It has organised, directed and improved cancer care in a way that we did not feel was even possible. Colleagues in the medical profession can now support each other in the planning of people's care and treatment to ensure the very best outcomes.

We need to do more, however, to tackle what I think is one of the most difficult matters: talking about what can be embarrassing bodily functions. Before getting cancer, people might have been completely unaffected by such problems, but afterwards might suffer from them for the rest of their life. It should not be necessary for people to emphasise how grateful they are to have been treated and to beg for somebody to help them with their problems. We must be up front in saying that it is wonderful that people have survived cancer, but that if symptoms reappear, they must be treated in an honest, open and up-front way. This House must support those cancer networks in responding properly to those who return to GP's surgeries or consulting rooms to say that they are developing or redeveloping symptoms of cancer. They must not be dismissed. I hope, therefore, that the Minister can give me a positive sign about how we can

[Laura Moffatt]

move this matter forward to reduce the effect that treatment has had on those who have done the most amazing thing—survived cancer and gone back out into the world.

1.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Ben Bradshaw): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) on securing this debate. Before addressing in detail the issues that she raised, I want to take the opportunity to recognise and praise the good work going on in the NHS in Crawley and throughout the country. NHS staff are delivering a better-quality health service than ever before, benefiting not only my hon. Friend's constituency but those of all hon. Members.

The significant investment and improvements that we have made in the past 10 years have meant that cancer services have improved significantly and cancer mortality has fallen. Those significant achievements include extending breast screening to women aged up to 70; the roll-out of the bowel cancer screening programme—the first programme to target both men and women; and the introduction of smoke-free legislation. During 2007-08, the NHS breast screening programme screened more women than ever before. More than 1.7 million women were screened and 14,110 cancers were detected.

There are now more cancer specialists, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley acknowledged. Since 1997, there are 1,879 extra cancer consultants and 3,716 extra consultants in other specialties who spend a significant amount of their time caring for cancer patients. For example, the number of consultant gastroenterologists increased from 322 in 1997 to 612 in 2008—an increase of more than 90 per cent. In 2006-07, £4.35 billion was spent on cancer services, compared with £3.4 billon in 2003-04.

As my hon. Friend also acknowledged, patients have experienced real improvements in their care. That is shown by major patient surveys in both 2000 and 2004. The National Audit Office report of March 2005 acknowledged the significant improvement in the management and provision of cancer services since the publication of the NHS cancer plan and the good progress made against all major targets. Waiting times for patients urgently referred have fallen dramatically since the two-week wait was introduced. The reductions in waiting times for patients with suspected cancer have reduced anxiety and delay. The latest figures, for January to March 2009, show that 94.5 per cent. of patients with suspected cancer were seen by a specialist within two weeks of being urgently referred by their GP.

Cancer mortality in people under 75 fell by more than 18 per cent. between 1996 and 2007, saving almost 9,000 lives. We are on course to meet our target of at least a 20 per cent. reduction in cancer deaths in people under 75 by 2010.

The "Cancer Reform Strategy", published in December 2007, builds on the progress that I have described. It sets out a clear direction for cancer services in the next five years and shows how we intend to deliver cancer outcomes that are among the best in the world. In the strategy, we also announced that, through the national cancer survivorship initiative, we would improve the ongoing support for people living with and beyond cancer.

My hon. Friend graphically and sensitively described some of the challenges faced by cancer survivors. About one quarter of people treated for cancer will experience long-term adverse effects on their quality of life as they live on past their initial cancer scares. The national cancer survivorship initiative was formally launched in September last year. It is co-chaired by the chief executive of Macmillan Cancer Support, Mr. Ciarán Devane, to whom my hon. Friend referred, and by the national clinical director for cancer, Professor Mike Richards. We have announced that the Government will provide £1.6 million to Macmillan Cancer Support in the current financial year to support that vital work. That funding will make a real difference to people living with and beyond cancer by helping them to receive the expert care and support that they need.

Seven national cancer survivorship initiative work streams have been created to develop new models of care and support that meet survivors' needs. The work streams include a range of cancer charities, health and care staff, academics, cancer survivors and carers for survivors. Each work stream focuses on either a stage in the survivorship pathway or a cross-cutting theme. The work streams are supported by 27 pilot sites across the country, which are testing new models of survivorship care and support.

Through the national cancer survivorship initiative, we are working to reduce the impact of unavoidable late effects of cancer and its treatment and to improve the health and well-being of cancer survivors. The work stream dealing with the late effects of cancer will improve our understanding of the risks and prevalence of longer-term consequences of cancer and its treatment. It aims to raise awareness among patients and professionals of the late effects of cancer and its treatment; to promote the early detection of late effects; and to ensure that appropriate information and services are available to those suffering late effects or undergoing treatment.

The work stream is looking at what data are available on the prevalence of late effects, so that we can better understand people's needs and target information, services and support. It is also developing national clinical leadership roles—that includes a gastroenterologist—to raise awareness of late effects and to champion the implementation of the new models of care that will emerge from the national cancer survivorship initiative.

I am informed that the late effects national survivorship administrative work stream is learning from the work being done at the Royal Marsden hospital by Dr. Andreyev, to which my hon. Friend referred. The hospital is not only performing excellently, but is the best-performing hospital of any type in the UK, so one would expect there to be much to learn from the excellent work that my hon. Friend mentioned.

In addition, the work stream is developing an e-learning package for general practitioners and other professionals on the late effects of cancer and its treatment, including the late effects of pelvic radiotherapy.

Other national cancer survivorship initiative work streams and test sites are looking at how personalised care planning can improve follow-up care for cancer patients; how cancer survivors can be empowered to live independently through support for self-management; how we can support those with active and advanced disease; how we can help people to stay in work, get back to work or access financial assistance; what more

we can do for children and young people who are cancer survivors; and how we can pull together evidence about the current picture of care and support for cancer survivors. Those work streams are developing new approaches to care and support for people after cancer treatment. We will publish a national cancer survivorship initiative vision and implementation plan at the end of this year.

The cancer reform strategy sets out a clear direction for cancer services over the next five years and shows how we will deliver cancer outcomes that are among the best in the world. I have referred to the fact that Dr. Andreyev's work at the Royal Marsden, which my hon. Friend highlighted, is part of our work on helping survivors. As she rightly said, the impact of cancer does not end after treatment. It is vital that we do all we can to support those who have been through cancer, so that they can live as full and active a life as possible. The national cancer survivorship initiative will make a real difference to those living with and beyond cancer, as well as to their families and their carers.

1.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Public Transport Accessibility

1.27 pm

David Taylor (in the Chair): We can now embark on the final debate of the morning. There will be a brief contribution, with the permission of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) and the Minister, from the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper).

Mr. David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a great privilege, Mr. Taylor, for me to speak in this debate under your chairmanship. I start with an apology. I apologise to the groups that have written to me about whether I would raise individual issues for them: I am thinking particularly of the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and Mencap. I asked for the debate specifically in relation to work that I have done with muscular dystrophy groups. For the past four years I have had the privilege of being the chairman of the all-party group on muscular dystrophy. It is a disease that has hit my family hard, so I was asked whether I would pick up that job quite soon after entering the House, and I was pleased to do so.

We have been conducting an inquiry in the group, in effect like a Select Committee inquiry, with witnesses, on a variety of issues relevant to muscular dystrophy, and in particular the fact that services around the country are very sporadic and differ a lot. As part of it, we had some discussion with young people who have come together, supported by the voluntary group V; that has provided them with a platform to put forward their views about life at the hard end, as young sufferers of muscular dystrophy.

On 5 May we had a lunch to mark a report entitled "End of the Line" by a group called Trailblazers. I am glad to see that the Minister has his copy. At the meeting there was cross-party support from Members of both Houses of Parliament. A notable person present was the director of the Association of Train Operating Companies. He was very supportive and was clear about the problems. The group asked him, "Why don't you ask all your chief executives to spend a day in a wheelchair?" That would be a positive-negative experience, so that people could see the real-life experience for some people in today's world. The people involved with the report are supportive of the changes that have been made by the Government since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, but they are aware that things need to get better.

Since it was set up, working with V, Trailblazers has set its own goals to produce a variety of work about social inclusion under the title, "Inclusion Now". The report it has delivered in the last few weeks is based specifically on the experiences of its members. They went undercover on buses, taxis and trains to see what life was really like. The report feeds back to people like me, the Minister and the wider public what the reality is. Four years after we passed the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, young people continue to be unable to use the services that should be available to them all by law. That is despite the real progress that has been made.

The Muscular Dystrophy Campaign's network of 16 to 30-year-olds who are fighting for the rights of these people came forward with five key findings from the report, which I will list. Wheelchair users have less

[Mr. David Anderson]

choice when using public transport. As a result, they are forced to pay more than their non-disabled peers. Young disabled passengers often feel like second-class citizens on public transport because of a combination of unreliable technology, poor disability awareness among staff and inaccessible stations. Young disabled passengers cannot always access the first bus, train or taxi that arrives at a station or stop. The assisted passenger registration service that insists on 24-hour advance booking for trains restricts the spontaneity and independence of disabled passengers. Even when it is accessed, it fails to provide a reliable service that passengers can have confidence in.

Non-wheelchair users with mobility difficulties also face serious problems when attempting to use buses and trains. Bus drivers often fail to park next to the kerb, meaning that there is a greater distance to cover to climb on to the bus. Drivers tend to pull away from stops too quickly before a passenger is seated and safe.

I will outline the action that Trailblazers is calling for. It wants the Government, local authorities and transport providers to ensure that accessibility on all modes of public transport, including air travel, is at the heart of all public transport planning, not merely a concept to which they pay lip service. Until all trains can be boarded and disembarked from independently, it wants the assisted passenger reservation service to be improved to guarantee that all disabled passengers receive a universally high level of service. It wants a major review into the accessibility of buses and coaches across the UK. It wants taxi subsidy cards for disabled passengers with a discount that reflects the dependence that many disabled people have on taxis.

I will now quote from the report. These are the words of people who have to live with these issues day in, day out. Judith Merry from Buckinghamshire stated:

"So many times I've been denied access on public transport because of my condition. Most people find it is easy to get around and be independent but when you have a disability simple tasks like this can be extremely difficult. Whether it's buses, trains or tubes, there's always some kind of problem. I know I'm not the only one who's experienced this."

Jennifer Gallacher from Middlesbrough stated:

"Wheelchair accessible buses do not run on every route everyday making the idea of hopping on a bus as a quick way of going on a journey unrealistic for a wheelchair user."

Colin Rabbich from Morecambe said:

"It's all well and good to hunt down the man with the ramp while on the platform, but once you're on the train what goes on at the arriving end platform side is completely out of your hands—bad communication or forgetful staff result in you not getting off the train! I feel that these experiences make you feel a huge lack in confidence with this service."

Jagdeep Kaur Sehmbi from Birmingham stated:

"A couple of times there has been no one with the ramp to help me off the train at my destination platform, even though I had informed them at the other station and been assured that someone would have the ramps ready."

Stephen Liney from Aylesbury said:

"Why should any disabled person have to wait around for assistance or have to ring 24 hours in advance to use a station? If money is being spent on new stations let's make sure people abide by the law and spend some money on making old stations accessible too."

Jessica Berry from Macclesfield stated:

"Some stations are great, particularly the smaller ones, but some never hurry themselves to come and get you off the train despite having booked the travel assistance at least 24 hours before. It's so scary being left on a train with no way of getting off."

Finally, Sulaiman Khan from London said:

"Taxis are prohibitively expensive, even with a Taxi discount card. I once had to pay £65 to go into central London, because I can't use the tube or trust the buses, which made even the driver cringe. The average person pays about £5 to go into central London from where I live."

The statistics in the report are damning. For buses, it found that on more than half of all journeys there was some problem with the accessible facilities at the station, the bus stop, or on the bus, or there was a poor service from members of staff. In a third of the Trailblazers journeys, the survey respondent was unable to board the first relevant bus to arrive at their stop because the access ramp or accessible space was unavailable or because the driver failed to stop at a location that was accessible to them. Was that the result of a lack of awareness or a lack of customer care? In one third of the journeys undertaken by Trailblazers the respondent said that the driver was not helpful.

For trains, the survey showed that in 50 per cent. of journeys the surveyor reported some form of disappointment with the disabled facilities at the station or on the train, or reported a poor service from staff. The survey found that, because few long-distance coach or bus companies provide wheelchair access, young disabled people who want to travel around the UK feel that they have no alternative to using train services, despite those problems. The survey also showed that in 25 per cent. of journeys, the passenger was unable to board the first train that they wanted to. The reasons given for that included: having to wait for staff availability; that the staff could not be contacted at the destination station; that there was only one member of staff and they were too busy to help; and that there was no disabled seating or space available.

For taxis, the survey found that two thirds of respondents were disappointed by a journey in some way, such as with the service provided or the cost incurred. Two out of five respondents felt that they paid more to use a wheelchair-accessible taxi than a non-wheelchair user would have paid.

The findings on the assisted passenger reservation service were that staff at stations were prepared for disabled travellers on only one in three journeys made using the service as it should be used. Of the passengers given an appointed meeting place, only 58 per cent. were met by staff. In 15 per cent. of all cases, no assistance whatever was provided to get passengers off the train.

Let me ask the Minister some questions, so that we can try to take this matter forward. I repeat the caveat in the report that people are very appreciative of the progress that has been made in recent years by our Government, but as my comments of the past 10 minutes show, there are ongoing issues. Will the Minister meet me and representatives from the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign network to discuss the evidence that the report has uncovered? Will he ensure that public transport contractors and local authorities place accessibility for disabled passengers at the heart of their development policies, and ensure that accessible facilities are as inclusive

as possible? Will he ensure that the woefully unreliable and ineffectual assisted passenger reservation service that is employed by rail companies will be reviewed and invested in, so that all stations and trains are fully accessible?

In conclusion, I reflect on the fact that today is the 56th anniversary of the conquest of Everest. At the launch on 15 May, a young lad called Dave Gale, from Carlisle—a place I know quite well—spoke to us. He was not in a wheelchair, and he looked like a fit young guy, but he told us about his problems with walking over a railway bridge. He said, "By the time I get to the top of the railway bridge, I'm gasping for breath." That is totally unacceptable; that is his Everest every day of the week.

1.39 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) on securing the debate, and all the young people involved in the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign on their work. I am very aware that this issue affects disabled people right across the spectrum. For example, my mum became deaf when she was four, but my father was born deaf. I have seen up close the difficulties that they face in their daily lives just trying to get around using public transport. In fact, my dad was abandoned for hours because the track that a train was to pull in on was changed. We were all very worried about him.

In making this brief intervention, I would like to alert the Minister to a situation in my constituency. Victoria Young, an 18-year-old wheelchair user from Skelmersdale, has met serious problems because of the inaccessibility of local transport. Arriva upgraded its West Lancashire fleet by bringing in 14-year-old double-decker buses cast off from the Wirral area. None of the buses has low-floor access. In a recent newspaper article, Victoria's father told how she was stranded in Wigan for three hours simply because there were no low-floor buses to bring her home. That cost her and her family £17 in taxi fares.

It does not take a genius to realise that Victoria and other people in West Lancashire with similar problems will be dramatically affected. The situation will affect their life, their social mobility and their interaction with friends who can go off to Southport or to Wigan while they cannot. That is not acceptable.

The Government's free concessionary travel pass shows commitment to enabling disabled people access to public transport, but it is rendered useless if private bus companies neglect their duty to provide accessible transport. I would like to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to agree that, in the 21st century, with our technological ability and the political will that has been demonstrated and included in the disability discrimination legislation, no disabled person the length and breadth of this country should have to accept not being able to use public transport.

1.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Clark): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Mr. Anderson) on securing this debate on what undoubtedly is an important matter for all concerned. I recognise and thank him for his comments about what we have achieved to date and the fact that there is still substantial work to be done. They were echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper).

Let me put on the record the Government's thanks for the work undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon on several disability areas, particularly his work as chairman for the past four years of the all-party group on muscular dystrophy. Equally, I want to put on the record thanks to the young people who undertook the work to compile information for an important report by the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign called "End of the Line". It helps all of us to understand some of the issues better.

The matter is important to young disabled people, but it should be important to all of us who have a commitment to ensuring that there are opportunities for all to be able to get to work, to leisure facilities, to Southport. Everyone should have equal opportunities.

I thank Trailblazers for its report and for the hard work that has been undertaken by the young people. The report affirms the important role that transport has to play in all our lives, but particularly the lives of young people, in enabling independence. It also highlights the importance of ensuring that young disabled people are involved in the decision-making process about travel provision in this country.

Unfortunately, the comments that my hon. Friend highlighted—from Jennifer, Colin, Jessica, Stephen and many others—show that the hurdles that people face when using public transport are still too much of a reality. Let me reassure hon. Members, however, that the Department for Transport remains committed to ensuring that we increase the accessibility of the transport system for all people in our society.

Let me confirm that point by saying that one of the Department's key strategic objectives is to ensure that we have greater equality of opportunity for all citizens, including those who are disabled and in wheelchairs, those who have sight or hearing difficulties and many others. Those people should be able to utilise the public transport system so that we have a fairer society.

We have made substantial progress in meeting some requirements, but there is still a substantial way to go to ensure that vehicles and infrastructure across the board are more accessible. All rail vehicles must meet our accessibility standards by 1 January 2020, and all buses on local scheduled services will have to do so by 1 January 2017.

I noted the contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, who talked about Victoria Young being stranded for three hours in Wigan. Of course that it is totally unacceptable. We need to ensure that we have a proper regime that recognises people's needs, their life scale and the equipment involved, and that we make steady progress towards achieving accessibility. Indeed, more than one third of all rail vehicles and more than half the buses in the current fleet are now accessible.

I recognise, however, that there will be substantial difficulties where a bus fleet is not accessible. A concessionary bus pass or a disabled person's bus pass will not help if there is no access to the facility in the first place. That is why the work that we have been doing with critical operators, including the railway

[Paul Clark]

companies and the Association of Train Operating Companies, is intended to move us sensibly towards making accessibility a reality. Of course, we all want that to happen sooner, but the time scale is sensible in terms of meeting requirements and phasing in new vehicles.

In that respect, the rail vehicle accessibility regulations also apply to London Underground. One of the first lines to have totally step-free accessibility will be the Victoria line, with the exception of Pimlico station, purely because there is no physical way of achieving step-free access down to it.

It is little help having accessible vehicles when there is no accessibility from platform to platform in stations and people cannot get from one platform to another to catch a train or to get out of the station. The Access for All programme is providing £370 million, which is ring-fenced over the next 10 years, to transform 140-odd stations that have already been identified. The aim is to ensure that there is proper access and accessibility to and between platforms.

Some £6 million is also being used for small schemes to find locally focused solutions and to make improvements for customers and passengers, including to information systems, which can benefit all, but which are particularly relevant to many of those who took part in the survey.

I noted the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon made about asking the chief executives of the railway companies to spend a day in wheelchairs, for example. We are working with ATOC to put online a new journey planning website that will list very clearly the accessibility criteria of all stations within the network, which, again, will help with planning. I will come back to the assisted passenger reservation scheme in a moment, because I recognise some of the points that were made in the report and by my hon. Friend.

Equally, taxis can often be one of the only ways for people to have mobility, particularly in areas that do not necessarily have commercially supported bus services and which may not have a railway station within the community. I recognise some of the comments that were made on costs but, equally, there are accessibility problems with some of the vehicles that are used in the taxi industry, which is exactly why, earlier this year, I launched a consultation document on the principles that might underline accessibility to taxis. The consultation has just closed and we are currently assessing the responses, but the Government are well aware of the issue.

We are also involved in negotiations on the European Commission proposals that were published at the tail end of last year, in December, on regulations that include rights for disabled passengers and passengers with reduced mobility on maritime transport and international bus and coach services. We continue to monitor compliance with the European regulation that came into force in July 2008 on the rights of disabled people and those with reduced mobility who are travelling by air.

While there are issues about the physical appropriateness of our transport systems, including access to stations, getting on to buses using low floor levels, and the ability and capability to get on to those buses in the right places and without additional hassle, staff support and assistance is also an issue, as is clearly outlined in the Trailblazers report. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members would agree that excellent examples of that abound, but we need to do more. The attitude towards people with disabilities does not meet the criteria and levels that we would want.

Although the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) (Amendment) Regulations 2002, which make it unlawful for transport operator staff to disregard the needs of disabled people, including those with wheelchairs, play an important and helpful role, equally disability awareness training is an integral part of the GoSkills national vocational qualification for drivers.

However, further work needs to be done. My hon. Friend talked about getting the directors of train operating companies in wheelchairs, but we urge transport operators to involve people with disabilities in training programmes so that they get first-hand knowledge. That would bring the report to life for those who are operating the systems and provisions that are required day in, day out by individuals.

We are also developing training travel skills so that people who have disabilities know what to expect and where to access information and so on. That is also something that can be done by working with organisations that represent groups such as people with muscular dystrophy. The Department for Transport has sponsored the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee to develop its Door to Door website, which brings together as a portal a range of information about access to the transport system and provision for disabled people.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire referred to the concessionary travel scheme that we have introduced. The headlines seem always to be about people aged 60 and over, but of course the scheme is also for many categories of people with disabilities. That is another way of ensuring that there is better inclusion for all concerned, and better access. However, I take on board what was said about the limitations created by not having the right bus.

I want to draw attention to what is being done in local authorities throughout the country as part of work on transport accessibility planning. It is particularly a question of seeing that joined-up provisions exist for people in vulnerable groups, so that they can get access to jobs and key services. Those considerations are now treated far more as mainstream parts of local transport planning. Not long ago I visited Worksop to see the Nottinghamshire scheme and find out what had been done there as part of the accessibility planning programme. I also saw the work that had been done in Liverpool and Merseyside.

The Local Transport Act 2008 was another opportunity to reinforce and improve transport provision for all concerned, by improving the facilities of the community transport sector. For example, drivers covered by section 22 permits are now allowed to be paid, so that where it is not possible for schemes to run commercially through companies such as Arriva or Stagecoach, or where there is not a demand for a big, heavily subsidised scheme, the community transport sector can help and can provide a facility, making inclusion possible for many people, including disabled people.

We are well on the road to meeting the goals that we set out for 2025 in "Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People". We have gone a long way towards

improving those life chances and the facilities to allow people to lead more independent lives. However, we have further to go. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon, together with representatives from Trailblazers, to listen first-hand and to consider the information that has been presented.

I said that I would return to the assisted passenger reservation scheme. I recognise some of the comments that have been made in the report, and by my hon. Friend. The scheme is owned by the train operating companies and the Association of Train Operating Companies, but the Department is working with them to see that there is better and more joined-up provision for delivering that service. Perhaps part of the discussion that we have should be to enable us to learn from some of the users of the services about where the weaknesses are in the scheme.

It has been useful to debate a piece of work that is clearly very important. It took commitment from the many young people and others involved to produce something that can be useful to our work in the Department for Transport, and is also important as a guide for transport operators in the further work that is needed.

Question put and agreed to.

1.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 3 June 2009

[HUGH BAYLEY *in the Chair*]

Rail Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Steve McCabe.)*

9.30 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I sought this debate because the economic recession is hitting the rail industry hard. Despite Government efforts to develop long-term infrastructure investment plans and the exhilarating tour of the rail system by Lord Adonis, most commentators are now reporting a rail industry in crisis. The falling demand in the economy is resulting in a falling demand for rail services—both passenger and freight. The drying up of revenue resources or income is leading to cuts in jobs and services and the curtailment of some potential investment. There is a concern among many in the industry that unless the crisis is addressed, we could be going into a spiral of decline for the long term.

Some commentators this week have suggested there is evidence that the recession is bottoming out. I have serious doubts about that, particularly given the analysis of the US economy. However, if we look at the Left Economics Advisory Panel's analysis of the evidence of the 1990s recession, we see that even though the rail industry was hit hard at the bottom of that recession, passenger numbers still fell for three years after the economy reached its lowest point. The evidence suggests that for the rail industry, although there is a potential crisis at the moment, worse is yet to come both for the rail and the underground.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue to the House. I am sure we all agree that investment in rail infrastructure would help us to climb out of recovery, and that we should take that opportunity. Such a strategy would also help to tackle some of the very serious problems such as the overcrowding on, among others, the c2c Fenchurch Street line into London, which is becoming intolerable and is a major safety issue. There are many reasons why we should make more investment in rail infrastructure and rolling stock.

John McDonnell: I shall come to the impact on passengers, but I agree that overcrowding is a key issue. Some of the figures that we are identifying on particular lines are staggering in terms of the impact of some of the cutbacks, and of the overcrowding problems that passengers experience.

The recession is not just impacting on jobs and services; it is exposing the inherent and disastrous failings of the privatised railway system based upon the franchising mechanism that the Government created, which, in turn, has created a dependency of the railway sector and the railway companies on the Government and the travelling public. That dependency has created extensive public subsidy for what some would consider fairly rapacious profiteering by private companies themselves. The franchising system that the Government introduced is good for those companies when the economy is booming, and they raked in immense profits during that period at the expense of taxpayers and the fares and charges on passengers. However, in an economic downturn, the franchising system is enabling those companies to pass back virtually all the risk to the public purse and the travelling public.

The rail industry could and should be one sector of the economy that is readily usable to increase demand and stimulate the economy. It should be usable as an investment tool for counter-recessionary measures through which public investment, particularly in the modernisation of the railway system infrastructure, could protect jobs, stimulate demand in the economy and assist in driving the economy out of recession. Rail could be used to set the Government firmly on the path of meeting climate change targets, as well as being part of our overall "greening the economy" policy. However, the Government have handed over to private profiteers effective control of the system. Private operators have made their profits and passed on their high dividends to their shareholders in the good times, and now, having milked the system for all it is worth, they are passing back the liabilities and problems to the Government and the travelling public.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is referring to the counter-cyclical potential for investment in rail infrastructure and also in the rolling stock. Four months ago, the Secretary of State announced that the £7.5 billion contract for the replacement of high-speed trains should go to the Agility consortium, which has two possible sites in North-West Leicestershire. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State was unable to be absolutely clear about the make-up of the 12,500 UK jobs that were said to be preserved or created by the award of that contract? Perhaps the Minister will put more flesh on the bones of that announcement.

John McDonnell: Many of us hope that the planned rail industry investment will protect jobs and stimulate job growth. We need to be very particular about how that investment is developed so that jobs are created, and created in this country as well. However, there is a lack of specific commitment, which has led to fears that a lot of the investment will not stimulate or protect jobs in this country. Workers in the industry, passengers and taxpayers are now paying for the new recession within rail.

I should like to outline how the rail recession is impacting on jobs. In recent months, we have had 7,000 job cuts in the rail sector, London Underground and Transport for London. Let me put on the record some of those job cuts. We have seen 750 jobs go at the National Express group across East Anglia and the east coast franchises. Network Rail, which is deferring 28 per cent. of rail renewals, says 800 jobs are at risk. Workers at other maintenance companies may also be in jeopardy because of the proposed withdrawal of track machine contracts by Network Rail itself.

Mr. Edward Timpson (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this extremely important debate. On recent job losses in the railway

[Mr. Edward Timpson]

industry, is he also aware that a fifth of the jobs at the Bombardier plant in Crewe have been lost since December? Bombardier was one of the bidders for the Hitachi contract. Does he agree that if the Government are to help with the continued investment in jobs in the railway industry, the future contracts that are up for tender, including the Thameslink contract, should give credence to the position that Bombardier is in?

John McDonnell: I certainly concur with the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and I will come on to issues relating to the supply chain.

Let me run through some of the other job losses. Some 530 jobs are to go at the UK's main freight operator DB Schenker, which was formerly English, Welsh and Scottish Railway Ltd, and it looks as though there may be further significant job losses there as a result of Network Rail's announcements. Some 480 jobs are to go at South West Trains, including a large number of ticket office and platform staff, 300 jobs are to go at Southeastern, 162 jobs at East Midlands Trains, 40 jobs at First ScotRail, 30 track welders at Amey, 37 signal and telecoms jobs at Colas Rail, and 86 jobs at Bombardier. Those have already been announced but tragically, more are to follow. There has been a proposed cut in ticket office opening times at First Capital Connect, which has put 20 posts at risk. On top of that, 1,000 jobs are potentially at risk at London Underground and, as a result of some of the Mayor's announcements, some 2,000 jobs are to go at Transport for London. That has had a significant impact on the rail industry itself. Hon. Members can understand why we have received reports from those on the front line of this industry that the sector is in crisis.

Freight has been affected as well as passenger services. We are told that the 530 jobs at DB Schenker that I mentioned could be just the first announcement. In the words of the company, there are further jobs at significant potential risk. There are also rumours of jobs at risk at Freightliner. However, the demand for freight has held fairly steady—Network Rail said that there has been only a 0.5 per cent. drop. It seems that a number of companies are using this opportunity to shed labour and reorganise, and there are sometimes threats to tear up union agreements.

Network Rail's decision to defer 28 per cent. of rail renewals work, which includes the laying of new tracks and new signals, means, in the assessment of the unions involved, that 200 miles of track work has been put on hold. That is 1,000 jobs at risk. The company admits in its business plan that that will have consequences further down the supply chain. It has estimated that 20 to 30 per cent. less heavy materials—for example, from quarrying and steel production—will be demanded over the coming year as a result of the deferral of the work. That runs counter to everything that the Government are seeking to do in investing in the long term and in infrastructure to stimulate demand in the industry and, of course, in the economy overall.

I am the convenor of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers parliamentary group. We have received reports from members expressing their fears about the impact on health and safety. The union has asked Network Rail for risk assessments of the deferral of some of the works, but has been denied them. We do not want to return to the days of Hatfield, Potters Bar or Greyrigg.

There are concerns about the impact further down the supply chain. On train manufacturing, as has been said, Bombardier in Crewe is proposing that 86 staff be made redundant, on top of the job losses at Washwood Heath, Eastleigh and Derby. The company is now saying that a number of its existing contracts will come to an end by the end of 2009. It is critical when contracts are being considered and developed to have some understanding of the impact on jobs in this country and the possible loss of expertise and skills if contracts are not awarded to companies such as Bombardier, which has skills that have been built up over generations of developing our train infrastructure and manufacturing for the needs of our industry. Concerns have been expressed across the House that the Bombardier situation has not been helped by the award of the contract for the new super express trains for the east coast main line and First Great Western to Hitachi in Japan.

On London Underground, the objective of saving £2.4 billion announced by Mayor Johnson in November 2008 has been achieved mainly through large-scale job losses and the scrapping of projects. Up to 3,000 jobs could be at risk, and the Mayor has moved to compulsory redundancies and tearing up some existing union agreements. That has provoked strike ballots, which have come in at five to one in favour of strike action to demonstrate the strength of feeling of London Underground and TfL workers. The unions are seeking negotiations with the Mayor to examine the way forward to protect jobs and ensure that services are maintained.

There is no better example than London Underground of the recession combined with the privatisation proposals of past years producing a toxic cocktail of policy failures. The Government's public-private partnership on the underground will go down as a memorial to the Prime Minister's bloody-minded refusal to listen to expert warnings about the privatisation mechanism that has been used. It is a monument to dogmatic incompetence. London MPs went through the experience of Metronet, which milked Londoners for £800,000 a week in profits before it went under. The contract had to be brought back in-house, with a resulting £2 billion debt legacy. We are now told that Tube Lines, which in the past few years has been making £1 million a week in profits, is in jeopardy because its estimate of its work on the contract it was awarded has left a £2.1 billion funding gap. Again, the private sector has failed and the public sector must pick up the tab as administration looms for that company.

It is ironic that the system that was imposed on London Underground is now being imposed on Tyne and Wear Metro. The £300 million of investment that the Government have promised will be delivered only if the company's services are put out to market testing. In effect, it is threatened with privatisation despite the opposition of local Members. In surveys, members of the public have demonstrated their absolute opposition to private sector involvement in the system, in opposition to local authorities in the area.

That is the impact of the recession on jobs in the rail sector, and it is a devastating appraisal of what is happening to those people on whom we have relied to deliver our rail system. The impact is not only on

workers, but on passengers, who are paying for the crisis through high fares. They are paying because of a combination of the recession and the privatised franchising system. British commuters pay twice as much as those in all other leading European countries to travel the same distance. Annual season tickets for journeys of between 11 and 25 miles cost an average of £1,860 in Britain, compared with £990 in France, £944 in Germany and £788 in Spain—Italy has the cheapest season tickets at £444—yet our fares are still going up. In January 2009, average regulated and unregulated rail ticket prices increased by 6 and 7 per cent. respectively. Arriva CrossCountry, which will receive public subsidy in excess of £1 billion over its franchise term, raised unregulated fares by an average of 11 per cent.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a very strong point. Does he agree that one of the problems is the excessively complicated fare structures in Britain, which means that travellers who have to travel at short notice because of a special commitment often pay ludicrously high fares? That does not happen in almost any other country in Europe.

John McDonnell: Time and again the Transport Committee has referred to the complicated fare system and the discrimination against passengers who have no access to the internet, where they might be able to make savings by advanced booking. There have even been increases recently in the prices of special arrangements for savings, such as the young persons and family and friends railcards—on 18 May, there was a 50 per cent. increase.

Other concessions have also been hit, which I find extraordinary. Members of the armed services face the same increase in the minimum fare using Her Majesty's forces railcard. Pensioners have had the price of their railcards increased by 8 per cent. recently. The minimum cost of using a network card, which offers discounts on journeys in London and the south-east, has risen by nearly a third. The card now costs £25 a year, which is a 25 per cent. increase on last year's price. Passengers as well as workers are getting it in the neck.

Hidden, stealth charges have also been introduced. For example, we found that one franchise—National Express east coast—has introduced a booking fee of £2.50. That was condemned by local passenger groups. Mr. Ashwin Kumar, a director of Passenger Focus, said:

> "Charging passengers to reserve a seat beggars belief, this is another example of back door fare rises. Some of National Express's routes cover extremely long journeys, cost considerable amounts of money and passengers expect that a seat is covered in this ticket price."

Recently, people have been paying more, but have increasingly received a poorer service.

Overcrowding has been mentioned. According to Department for Transport figures, 70 people stand for every 100 who sit on Southern and South Eastern. I feel sorry for people who travel on the most overcrowded train in the country, the 7.15 from Cambridge to King's Cross, which carries an average of 870 passengers, but has only 494 seats. That sounds like the Chamber of the House of Commons.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. My daughter-in-law used to travel regularly on the train from Cambridge. When she was pregnant, she had to sit on the floor. That is what is happening. Does he agree that the railway industry is sweating the assets to maximise profits and ignoring passenger comfort?

John McDonnell: That has been a consistent process in the privatised system and particularly in these franchises. Companies can maximise their profits by increasing fares and gaining public subsidy, while not rewarding the passengers with sufficient improvements in services.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he agree with the Public Accounts Committee that it is the Government who do not consider the damaging side effects on passengers of the rail franchising process and that that process is causing the problem?

John McDonnell: I will come on to the rail franchising process because it is at the root of the system. That relates to this Government's dogmatic commitment to privatisation, which the hon. Gentleman's party probably shares.

Another issue passengers face is delays. I am sure that hon. Members will exemplify that with what is happening in their areas. We all remember the delays on First Great Western that produced a passenger strike only 18 months ago. There were demonstrations in which passengers refused to pay their fares because of the company's failure to deliver services on time.

There have been front-line staff reductions. There are regular reports of ticket office closures. There are fewer platform staff, which increases people's fear of a lack of safety. There are reductions in catering facilities. This week, I heard about the scheme companies have come up with for shorter trains, which beggars belief.

The service is no longer based on responding to passenger needs. The public service ethos that existed in British Rail has gone as a result of franchising and privatisation. The service is concerned not with passenger needs, but with cost cutting to maximise profits. That is a failure of franchising. At the heart of the crisis is the privatised franchising system. There is profiteering by converting fare increases and subsidies into profits and dividend payments for shareholders. That occurred even up to the edge and into the current economic crisis.

In December 2008, the RMT published research showing that the big five transport operators were converting above-inflation fare increases into profits and dividend payments of between 10 and 33 per cent. Arriva's operating profit to 30 June 2008 was £14.8 million. The dividend payment was 10 per cent. First Group's operating profits to September last year were £48.3 million. The interim dividends were 10 per cent., with £55 million paid out in 2007. Go-Ahead's operating profits in the 12 months to September were £77.2 million and the dividends paid out £48 million. In the six months to June last year, National Express's operating profits were £28 million and the dividends paid out £40 million. Stagecoach's operating profits to October last year were £31.7 million, with a 33 per cent. increase in dividends paid out to shareholders.

[John McDonnell]

Interestingly, the franchises are now floundering. The Government attempted to increase some form of control over the profiteering by introducing premium payments to the franchises. There had to be a repayment to the Government, but that was calculated using extremely bullish passenger usage figures. Many of us—people inside the industry and outside commentators—warned at the time that the bullish passenger growth predictions were not likely, particularly with the threat of recession. It is on the record in the trade and financial press that the Government were warned by the RMT that any downturn would jeopardise the premium payments. That is exactly what happened.

The situation has been made worse by the bizarre cap-and-collar arrangements introduced to the franchises. Many hon. Members have been involved in financial arrangements in the public or private sector. I was chair of the Greater London council finance committee and have worked in the private sector. I have never seen contracts like these entered into before by the public sector or others. The agreements offer protection to the private sector by committing taxpayers' money to part-fund any shortfall if the revenues fail to reach levels predetermined in the franchise negotiations. Basically, that means that even if the private sector does not make the profits it wants, the Government have to intervene to subsidise it. That is an extraordinary agreement to enter into. As hon. Members across the Chamber have said, this is about privatising the profits while the risk is nationalised.

It has been reported that private sector franchise agreements in many areas are falling apart at the seams. The franchise operators are coming to the Government for further support and are trying to renegotiate the franchise. In some instances, there is talk of handing back the keys. The best example is the east coast line. In various meetings, Ministers have categorically denied that they are renegotiating the franchise or offering a management contract to the National Express Group that runs it. However, the National Express Group has made it public that it is in talks with the Government about the repayment terms, which it describes as too onerous. On the day when National Express Group announced that publicly, its shares shot up by 17 per cent. and by 29 per cent. the next day.

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): On that point, I received a written answer from the Minister on 8 May about press speculation on the replacement of a franchise by a fixed-fee agreement for National Express on the east coast. When asked what his policy was, he replied:

"Operating agreements with train operating companies may be considered when appropriate to discharge the Department for Transport's duty to ensure continuity of rail services."—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2009; Vol. 492, c. 488W.]

That appears to be an acknowledgment that a franchise can be replaced by a fixed-fee agreement. Is that the hon. Gentleman's interpretation of that answer?

John McDonnell: That is my understanding of it. We need more openness and transparency on what is happening in the negotiations that are taking place with a number of franchisees.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, I dealt with the Minister's predecessor on the First Great Western's yellow card. Speaking of franchises, it would be useful to have it on the record whether that yellow card has been expended by First Great Western. Has it met its side of the bargain? Talk about irony! It is as if a premier league striker has been fined for misdemeanours and the Football Association is paying the fine. It would be useful to know whether the Government are paying First Great Western's fine for its yellow card for all it did wrong two years ago. It seems that the Government have to pay, yet again.

John McDonnell: My hon. Friend and I have discussed First Great Western's yellow card and how it has been monitored with successive Ministers with responsibility for rail.

My point is that the franchises want to have it all ways. They want profits in the good times, but when the franchises become too expensive, they want Government subsidies or to hand it back and negotiate management contracts. I am bitter about National Express laying off 750 workers on the East Anglia and east coast lines. We also know that, in April, Stagecoach went into dispute with the Department for Transport over its support payment system, and the case has now gone to arbitration. Again, it is arguing that there will be an operating loss if the arbitration is not resolved in its favour. On 13 May, First Group announced increases in its rail division of £2.1 billion and an operating profit of £94.2 million, but at the same time its managing director was reassuring shareholders not to worry because the company was accepting taxpayers' subsidies to maintain other franchises in operation. This is the economics of the madhouse, and it is time to stand back.

The Government recognise that they will have to intervene. We are aware of that because the DFT recently advertised on its public tenders website for consultants to ensure "continuity of train services" and, if necessary, run a rail franchise on the Government's behalf. If they are admitting in adverts that they will have to intervene in some instances, we need to ensure that there is a statement to the House about how they plan to do that, especially where, when and how.

I know that other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall end on these points. It is time for the Government, and indeed all of us, to stand back and have a rethink. We need to turn this rail crisis into an opportunity. We need to move away from the dogmatic obsession with privatisation and franchising arrangements. I cannot understand why the Government are refusing to consider other options, particularly a public sector option or role. Like a number of hon. Members present, I have been asking questions about how existing franchises are assessed and whether there could be a public sector benchmark or evaluation, such as a value-for-money assessment of alternatives in the public sector as against the private sector. When Connex was taken into the public sector and lost its south-east franchise, it was run successfully by the public sector for two years. A number of us argued then that we should step back from the dogma and keep at least one franchise in the public sector that could be a benchmark against private sector operators, but what did the Government do? They reprivatised it.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. However, I understand that behind the scenes, very secretly, serious consideration is being given to taking the east coast main line in-house. Other franchises are in similar difficulties, so we could move in that direction. Does he agree that we should urge the Government to move rapidly in that direction?

John McDonnell: I am not party to those discussions, but the way that resignations have been going in the past couple of days, my hon. Friend may be party to them sooner than he thinks.

There is an inevitability about this. For the first time in perhaps three decades we can start having a rational debate about the future of rail as part of an integrated transport system that is free from the dogma of privatisation, and that goes back to what works best. I urge the Government to launch that rational approach as franchises go into crisis and to consider using the public sector and testing that option. I urge them to accept that there might be an opportunity on at least one franchise to use the public sector option as a benchmark for others.

The travelling public have had enough of the greed and profiteering. We have gone past the days when the market could be said always to offer the optimum solution to every area of policy. We need an end to cuts in jobs and services, and we need an improvement in the long-term investment plan, but it has to be based on a public service ethos that overrides short-term profiteering. I urge the Minister to take back the message that we all want a rational debate about the future of rail. We want to use the current failures as an opportunity for future successes. It is time to move away from dogma and get to grips with the reality of what workers in the railway industry are experiencing with job losses and what passengers are experiencing with fare increases and reductions in service delivery. We must consider the potential for the sector to tackle the recession overall, to be part of the stimulus of demand, and to introduce an integrated transport policy that will help to tackle climate change. That could make a major contribution to rehabilitating political debate across the parties, and to having a reasoned and rational debate on such an important area of policy.

Hugh Bayley (in the Chair): I intend to start the wind-ups at 10.30 am. Three hon. Members are trying to catch my eye, so they will have about eight minutes each.

10.5 am

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing the debate on this serious issue, which affects people from the north to the south, and from the east to the west. He has detailed the job losses and other problems in the rail industry, which has been suffering a severe recession, but there is also an opportunity to move out of the crisis in the industry. One way out of the recession is to make sure that the UK rail industry plays a key part in that recovery, and I shall touch on a few places where such opportunities could be grasped by this Government, or whoever is in government in the years ahead.

I grew up with a railway line at the bottom of my garden and then went off to study transportation engineering at Napier polytechnic—now Napier university—in Edinburgh. As I come from Edinburgh, a key part of the railway industry that strikes me as being important is the Forth rail bridge, which was opened in 1890 and on which 4,000 workers worked. We need to see whether we can revitalise our rail industry, because much of its rolling stock and other supplies are no longer from this country. We have an opportunity to move forward to high-speed rail, as other countries have. We need to make sure not only that that high-speed rail is good for the environment, but that it stimulates the economy throughout the land and provides the shovel-ready jobs that have been mentioned. We could get the construction, civil engineering and railway industries working together to produce jobs immediately and to stimulate the economy.

When this country was growing, 100 years ago, the rail industry played a key part in that growth by improving transport links, but when we jump on to today, what do we see? We see opportunities for high-speed rail, with the Eurostar link taking passengers away from more polluting forms of transport such as air travel. We could extend the high-speed railway network throughout the UK, but I fear that opportunity has been largely missed because there has been a lack of clear vision from the Government. Many other countries have grasped that vision; there are new high-speed rail links in China, Russia, Brazil, India, Poland and Argentina, but what do we have in the UK? Very little.

There is a range of reasons for having high-speed rail, although I shall not spend too much time talking about them. One is the reduced impact on the environment of having high-speed rail links from cities such as my own, Edinburgh, from where 60 per cent. of flights go to other UK cities, causing a high level of pollution. Many of those flights come here to London, where there are protests about the need for a third runway at Heathrow airport. If we had a decent high-speed rail link, many people would decide not to fly, because they could jump on the train and it would take only a few hours to travel the length of the country. In other countries, there is clear evidence that where there are alternative high-speed rail journeys of three or four hours, people will happily move from the air to the railways. A good example of that is the Madrid to Barcelona line in Spain, which was opened in 2008, bringing massive benefits. Previously, trains had made up 15 per cent. of all journeys, but they now make up more than 50 per cent. That was one of the busiest aviation routes in the world, but it has been overtaken by trains.

The opportunities are certainly there, but there is another reason why high-speed rail has a wider opportunity at a time when we are looking at constitutional reform in the UK. There has been a push from the Scottish National party and separatist parties to say that that is the way forward. A high-speed rail system would actually unite the parties, as it is uniting the regions of Spain. High-speed rail will not come from the south of England to Edinburgh if there is a separate Scotland, so it is another reason to tie the country together.

There are opportunities in the UK not only for high-speed rail, but for light rail. In Edinburgh a tram installation programme is in progress and massive investment is being made. I have seen the mock-up of the tram and it looks great, and very efficient, but what

[John Barrett]

has happened on the ground? The tram contract has been awarded to a Spanish firm. Undoubtedly it will produce high quality trams, as it is the same company that produced the trains for the Heathrow Express. The company that has been given the design, construction and maintenance contracts, the Bilfinger Berger and Siemens group, is not a local company, and although it is no doubt efficient, it would have been good if we had had the infrastructure in this country to provide the construction, maintenance and rolling stock and look forward to the future.

In Edinburgh we have had job losses as a result of the recession, as the biggest single employer in the city is the financial sector. The largest employer in Edinburgh, HBOS, is based in my constituency, and there have been many redundancies, but at the same time inward investment in Edinburgh is happening. Companies that are pulling back from investments elsewhere have said that they are going to Edinburgh because it will have an improved transport infrastructure in the years ahead. High quality public transport is absolutely vital. Providing a good quality transport system locally and then a high-speed rail system nationally will not only provide the jobs for the future, but ensure that our economy is in a fit position to take advantage of opportunities when we come out of the recession.

I have kept my remarks brief to allow other Members to speak. Edinburgh plays a key part, and not only because there are many local trainspotters—indeed, the book "Trainspotting" was based in Edinburgh—and because the Forth railway bridge is there. I would like the rail industry to play a key part in getting us out of the recession with the opportunities that are there for the future.

10.12 am

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing the debate and on his expert and detailed analysis, with which I entirely agree. I speak as a dedicated lover and supporter of the railway industry, who has commuted by rail daily for the past 40 years. The railways are important to me and, more importantly, to Britain's future because they are the future mode of transport, especially in an era of energy difficulties and diminishing oil.

We are now seeing the beginning of the end of the mad, Dr. Strangelove experiment called railway privatisation. It has cost vast sums of money, does not work for passengers or taxpayers and was always utterly misguided. It has simply put vast sums of money into private pockets to very little benefit. The first stage in that decline was the collapse of Railtrack, which I understand had a neon sign in the foyer of its building showing its share price: that is how much it cared about railway safety and comfort and the future of passengers. Network Rail took over from Railtrack and effectively brought the network into public ownership, but its behaviour and methods continued many of the bad private sector practices.

Shortly after the creation of Network Rail I attended a waterfront conference addressed by its then deputy chief executive, who showed how the contracts would work and how they would not work. He explained how the specifications were drawn up by Network Rail and given to the contractors, who would then work precisely to those specifications because that is what they were required to do and because they would be fined if they did not do so, even when the specifications were wrong. If the work was done incorrectly over a weekend possession, by the Monday morning it would be inspected and found to be wrong. The work would then have to be done again with another specification and the contractor would say, "Thank you very much", having doubled its money and got twice as much work. That, of course, meant more delays and interruptions to services.

Contracting, subcontracting and sub-subcontracting creates interfaces, all of which mean costs—interfaces always mean costs. British Rail, when in operation, was an integrated system with directly employed staff, so such interfaces did not exist, and if they did they were minor, internal and easily overcome. British Rail employed staff directly, worked under cash limits and corrected engineering work as it went along. It did not have the contracting chaos we have seen under Railtrack and Network Rail. It is not surprising, therefore, that when everything is taken into account, track renewal costs are five times higher then they were before privatisation. No wonder costs are out of hand.

I am sure that the Minister has seen the book, "Britain's Railways, 1997-2005" by the academic Terry Gourvish, which was commissioned by the Strategic Rail Authority. It is a matter-of-fact book showing that total support for the railway industry between 1996-97 and 2006-07 increased fivefold, from just over £1 billion to £5.5 billion. That was simply putting money in private pockets, although I accept that some of it accounted for extra work. Maintenance has been taken in-house, but even that has not improved as much as it should have because of the continuation of practices similar to those that grew up under the privatised contracting system.

I am short of time and so will omit references to the train operating companies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington dealt with that effectively. However, I will say that Virgin has recently complained that punctuality on the west coast main line is still as bad as it was when work to the tracks was being undertaken and has not improved, so the TOCs are still unhappy with the quality of what Network Rail is providing.

Network Rail has had a good financial settlement from the Government, but at the same time it is cutting back on renewals and sacking staff. In my view, and that of many others, that is evidence of financial incompetence. Do those in Network Rail deserve their huge salaries and bonuses? I think not: they are thoroughly undeserved. Indeed, the Prime Minister, when talking about MPs' expenses at the weekend, said he wants to apply the same rigour to executives in the BBC and the NHS, "etc." I suggest that the biggest component of that "etc." should be Network Rail. We should not reward it for failure.

Valuable staff are being made redundant—often the experienced staff trained by British Rail, and sometimes because they get in the way when they want to do things right, are fussy and have a sense of commitment to doing the job well. Network Rail wants people who do the job quickly, cheaply and not well. Those staff being sacked are being defended by their unions at great expense, but Network Rail pays large sums of money to

stop cases going to tribunal at the last minute when it is obvious that it will lose. That was detailed in a previous Adjournment debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Devine).

The whole edifice of privatisation is crumbling, and I believe that it is time to recreate the integrated, publicly-owned railway industry and save vast sums of public money, and passengers' money into the bargain. Five years ago the then Secretary of State for Transport, now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, said the lack of investment had been compounded by ill-thought-out privatisation, producing fragmentation, excessive complication and dysfunctionality. I think that is a function of privatisation and of the way it has operated.

Two years ago I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Mehdorn, the former chairman of Deutsche Bundesbahn, the German state railways. An impressive man with a strong and forceful character, he lives in a castle and has weightlifting as a hobby. He was extremely forceful in his absolute opposition to being forced into privatisation on the British model. He said it would be a disaster if DB was fragmented in the way British Rail had been. He is no longer the chairman, but the Germans have decided, very sensibly, not to privatise DB but to keep it in the public sector.

I recently met some colleagues from the former rail freight company English, Welsh and Scottish Railway and mentioned that it had been nationalised. They responded, "Oh no it hasn't." I replied that it was now owned by German state railways. It is all very well being owned by German state railways, but I suggest that we should take the British railway network back into British state ownership and operate our railways the way the sensible continentals operate theirs.

10.19 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I welcome this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing it, and on the good work that he does in chairing the RMT group, consistently taking up railway-related issues and pointing out the failure of the privatisation model.

In reality, British Rail, which was nationalised after the second world war, had a good record in trying to protect a social railway, despite the best efforts of Dr. Beeching. BR was always underfunded and under-resourced for research and development. It was privatised on the basis that it was costing too much money. The then Tory Government said that they wanted a self-sufficient railway, but, shortly into privatisation, the amount of public money going into the railway system was greater than at any time during nationalisation.

We now pay far more money to private companies to run the railway system than we ever paid when it was publicly owned, and we have closed off from ourselves the possible benefits of any profitability coming from the railways. It is, frankly, a ludicrous system.

My hon. Friend pointed out the dogma attached to the privatisation. I believe that he would agree that surely now, of all times, it is time to end that dogmatic nonsense and have a fully publicly owned, publicly accountable and publicly run railway service in this country.

Mr. Drew: Does my hon. Friend accept that we were almost at a critical stage some years ago because of a lack of railway engineers? That is one way in which privatisation has completely undermined the basic infrastructure of the industry. There is no better example than the lack of railway engineers.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins) pointed out that we have a shortage of manufacturing capacity in this country to produce trams, railway carriages, locomotives and many other things. If people go around the world and look at any old railway, they will see that most of the stuff is British-made—most of it by Westinghouse or others, and any of the older trains, including the high-speed trains in this country, by British Rail Engineering. It was an act of political dogma by the previous Government to destroy British Rail Engineering. We lost the manufacturing capacity that went with it, in the same way that bus and other manufacturing capacities were damaged in favour of a money economy rather than a manufacturing economy. We are paying the price for that.

In a recession, investment in public transport infrastructure is of double importance. It protects jobs and the industries themselves, but it also provides a good public transport and freight transport system for the future. Therefore, I appeal to the Government not just to maintain but to increase investment in the rail network.

There is limited time, so, as a London MP, I shall raise a few specific points concerning London and its needs. London relies heavily on public transport. Indeed, public transport usage in London is at a very high level. The former Mayor and, before that, the Greater London council and Transport for London tried hard to invest in improving the bus and underground networks and, more latterly, the overground rail network.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington was right to point out the utter madness at the time when Mayor Livingstone wanted to refurbish the underground system. The then Chancellor of the Exchequer, currently the Prime Minister, insisted that the whole business be done through a public-private partnership. We thus had two companies set up—Tube Lines and Metronet—to undertake the refurbishment of various parts of the underground. Metronet famously finally went under and had to be taken over by TfL, and the staff were taken over as well. Thankfully, some of their working conditions have improved as a result.

However, Tube Lines is still part of the public-private partnership. London Underground is paying it £5.1 billion for the refurbishment work that it is doing, but it is demanding £7.2 billion. Who will pay the £2.1 billion shortfall? My view is that if Tube Lines cannot do the work for the money that it contracted to do it for—if it is not capable of doing the work on schedule, on time and to the satisfaction of TfL—it should simply be taken over. The work should be taken in-house by TfL, and the conditions and jobs of the workers guaranteed.

There is one particular group of workers that I want to draw attention to in this rail debate, short as it is. Those are the people, mainly women, who clean the underground stations. Under Mayor Livingstone and,

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to his credit, continued by Mayor Johnson, all Greater London authority employees enjoy the London living wage, which is higher than the national minimum wage to reflect the higher costs of living in London. Former Metronet employees, particularly the cleaners, now receive a London living wage, thanks to the actions taken by their unions and by the administration itself.

Tube Lines cleaners work for the national minimum wage in disgusting, dangerous conditions, for a company with appalling management practices. Workers are harassed, and great pressure is put on them. Many of them have no security of employment—as I understand it, almost from day to day, never mind from week to week—under the company's antediluvian management practices.

I appeal to the Government to look into the employment of those contract cleaners, to insist that they receive the London living wage and that management practices be brought up to date for the 21st century. We must show respect for those people. They do a filthy, horrible job. They clean up all the crap that is left on the trains and in the stations every day, and we should thank them for it and pay and reward them properly for so doing.

I wish briefly to raise two other points concerning London. One is about the electrification proposals for some of the London overground lines. The north London network goes from Stratford to Richmond; the Barking to Gospel Oak line is attached to it. The Stratford to Richmond line is electrified and is a busy line indeed. It is doing extremely well but needs to do even better. It needs more trains, better signalling and better service, and it is heavily used.

The Barking to Gospel Oak line was once due for closure. Apparently, a previous Conservative Transport Secretary looked over a bridge on the Holloway road, found that there was a railway under it and wondered why it was not a road. We then went through the miserable experience of protecting the line from closure and, fortunately, were successful. The line is now much busier and more effective. Indeed, it is now suffering from overcrowding because it is so successful. That is a line that was due to be closed less than 20 years ago.

There are proposals to electrify the line. Seventy-five per cent. of the benefit of electrification would go to freight usage, because a much easier freight corridor from the east coast to the west coast of England would be opened up. Currently, electrified trains can bring freight in from the east coast ports of Felixstowe and Harwich, but they have to use diesel locomotives along the Barking to Gospel Oak line. The cost of electrification of the line is £40 million, of which £25 million has apparently already been earmarked by the Government. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that.

There is a £15 million gap, which is not very much, given the huge benefits that could be achieved by that piece of electrification. My hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen) and I have put down an early-day motion on the matter. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the Government actively support that electrification programme.

My final point concerns the relationship between the Government and TfL on station improvements and management schemes. My constituency includes Finsbury Park station, which is one of the busiest suburban, or semi-surburban, interchange stations for the east coast main line, the Moorgate to Hertford line, the Victoria line and the Piccadilly line. It is a very busy but very out-of-date station. It is impossible for anyone with any kind of walking difficulties or anyone using a pram, a pushchair or anything like that to access the station. It is a dreadful station in terms of step-free access.

Mayor Livingstone had a plan to introduce a completely step-free access arrangement for the whole station. It has since been postponed or cancelled by Mayor Johnson, but Network Rail, to its credit, has said that it will introduce step-free access from the street to the mainline platforms that are above ground level. However, TfL will not introduce a lift service from the street level to the underground platforms. We have the ludicrous situation of a lift going halfway through the station. We can get from the mainline platforms to the street, but we cannot get to the underground, yet most of the journeys that require an interchange involve going between a mainline platform and the underground.

As I said, the situation is ludicrous. It will probably end up costing double the amount to deal with the matter at some future point. Will the Minister be kind enough to intervene and knock heads together on the step-free access programme—I understand that there is a window of opportunity of a very few months to get this sorted out—so that when the work starts, it can be for the whole station, not just half? That might sound slightly localised and arcane, but it is very important as a message that the Government are serious about disability access at all stations around the country and are prepared to intervene where necessary to ensure that that is provided.

10.30 am

Norman Baker (Lewes) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and his Labour colleagues on presenting a common philosophical approach to the future of the railways. I somehow doubt that it will be shared by the Minister but we will doubtless find out. I congratulate the Minister on not being derailed and still being in office at this point. I hope that he is still there next week—a lot can happen in a couple of days.

On the effect of the recession on the railways, I shall concentrate predominantly on the issue of franchises, which has been picked up by Labour Members. The Treasury's policy has been to try to reduce the call on the public purse of running the railways—rather belatedly, given the huge increase with Railtrack and other post-privatisation calamities. However, the consequence of the method that the Treasury has adopted to try to reduce the call on the public purse has not been in the best interests of the railways or their passengers, be they people or freight users.

Essentially, the policy of driving up income means that the Government are very vulnerable when a recession comes upon the industry. Suddenly, train companies are unable or unwilling to meet the costs of the reduction in income that they experience as a consequence of diminishing passenger or freight usage of the railways. That is a serious matter. It is leading to losses in individual companies, to job losses, as the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington rightly said, and to passengers suffering. Companies are considering where they can make cuts to

services that are not governed by specific franchise agreements, so we are seeing cuts in booking-office hours, cuts in the number of staff on trains and cuts in catering services, most famously on the east coast main line. National Express appears to be adopting a policy of presenting bleeding stumps to the Government in the hope that they will bail it out. I hope that the Government will not be seduced by that rather ludicrous tactic. National Express's customer base is being damaged by how it is approaching the matter.

What happens if a franchise fails? We have yet to receive a clear answer from the Government on that. I am asking the Minister, although I am not particularly hopeful, to give us a clear answer today on the issue. Lord Adonis, for whom I have a great deal of time and respect, has said repeatedly that the Government will not allow renegotiations of franchises. That appears to be the Government's stated position, but the parliamentary answer that I referred to appeared to hold out the prospect of a train franchise being replaced by a fixed-fee operating agreement. In other words, National Express or some such company could hand in the franchise but could carry on running the franchise under a new financial arrangement. That is in effect a new train franchise—a replacement for the existing one. I therefore need to ask the Minister this point-blank: are the Government considering fixed-fee agreements for train operating companies as part of existing franchise arrangements, or are they not? What is the role of a fixed-fee agreement? If the Minister made that clear, that would be very helpful.

My view on the franchise agreements is clear. The Government should play hardball with the companies. They entered into a financial agreement and should be made to stick to it. If a company hands in a franchise, any other franchise held by it should be handed in or taken away from it at the same time. Indeed, I would go further, and this is where the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington may be surprised, but pleasantly, I hope. In my view, if a franchise is handed in to the Government—handed back—it should be held in the public sector as a public interest franchise, not least as a comparator for other franchise agreements currently operating. That was the case partly with South Eastern, when the Connex franchise was handed in.

However, I am not talking about a comparator simply in traditional Treasury terms. We need to consider what we are trying to get from franchises. A public interest franchise would allow us to recast what we expect from the railway. It is not simply a matter of pounds, shillings and pence, which is how the Treasury looks at these matters. We need to consider passenger targets for franchise holders. What do the passengers want? That is not necessarily the same as the financial outcome that the Treasury demands of train operating companies that are successful in franchise bids. If we had a passenger-based franchise, that would enable people to make not only a financial comparison but a passenger delivery comparison, which would be useful in driving up performance throughout the railway industry.

Having said that—this is where the hon. Gentleman will disagree with me—I believe that there is a case for significantly longer franchises but, crucially, with new passenger-based targets included in them so that there is not simply a financial measurement. In our view, a 30-year franchise with a five-year renewal checkpoint would be a sensible arrangement whereby if the passenger-derived, passenger-oriented targets were met, the franchise would be retained; if they were not met, the franchise would be taken away. That would give a train operating company a direct incentive to meet passenger objectives.

Kelvin Hopkins: Would it not mean that the franchisees would just refuse to accept arrangements that made the franchises too onerous, and if in time they became too onerous, would not the franchisees just come to Government for more handouts? Would it not be just like the commitment that we have made to private finance initiative schemes, which will cost the taxpayer billions of pounds over the next 30 years?

Norman Baker: I am seeing a Treasury Minister in 45 minutes' time about a PFI arrangement that has gone ludicrously wrong in my constituency; it relates to a waste contract. On the hon. Gentleman's question, no, it depends on the line that the Government take. The Government could say to the train companies, "These are the rules. These are the criteria you have to meet. These are the passenger targets you have to meet." If they want to walk away from that, let them walk away and there can be a return to the public sector. That means that the Government would be involved in a bit of hardnosed negotiation with those companies. It would not simply be five companies giving people the runaround; there would be an alternative, which is a public sector interest test. That is the line that I would advise the Government to take.

The question of fares is very important. The Government have a policy of RPI plus 1 per cent. That was reinforced by Lord Adonis on 25 February when he said that the Government stood by the RPI plus 1 per cent. formula. However, rail fares in recent years have increased enormously above inflation. Since the Government came to power, the cost of travelling by train has gone up by 7 per cent. above inflation, while the cost of travelling by car has fallen by 13 per cent. As a motorist, I say to motorists that they should not moan about fuel prices. They are doing better under the current Government than train and bus passengers. Train and bus passengers should be out protesting. They are the ones who have seen the price increase.

RPI plus 1 per cent. makes no sense in a Government policy designed to tackle climate change. If we want to tackle climate change, we have to persuade people to use lower-carbon means of transport. It means getting people on to buses and trains, although they are being priced above inflation, and it means getting people off roads and certainly out of the air, although that means of travel is being reduced in price. That cannot make any sense. What will the Government do to co-ordinate their climate change strategy with their transport strategy, which is producing the opposite result to the one that they ostensibly say they want? This year, we could have frozen rail fares instead of forcing them up. We could have done that by cancelling 4 miles of motorway widening. That would have paid for all rail fares to have been frozen this year, but the Government want 4 miles of motorway widening instead. I know which one the public at large would choose if they were given the option.

[Norman Baker]

It is very important for climate change purposes, for jobs and to tackle the recession that we end up with continual and increased investment in railway infrastructure projects. We could start with infill electrification. I am pleased that the Government have committed, or almost committed, themselves to electrification of the midland main line and the line down to Exeter. *[Interruption.]* Well, the Minister can confirm that he is committed to that. I agree that infill electrification in particular has a role to play. Lines such as Barking to Gospel Oak are crying out for investment in that regard.

We must also ensure that we invest in high-speed rail. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, West (John Barrett) made that point, and quite rightly, as Scotland must reap the benefits of the high-speed rail network as much as anywhere else in the country. I want to ask the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), to confirm that the Conservative Treasury team, not him and the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs. Villiers), is committed to high-speed rail investment and to Crossrail investment if the Conservatives take power.

Stephen Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Baker: The hon. Gentleman is on in a minute; he can tell me in his response to the debate. Saying that his party has no plans to do anything else is no answer, by the way—I want a firm commitment from him that that investment will go ahead if there is a Conservative Government.

Lastly, on Network Rail, there is the issue of efficiency. It takes five to eight hours to change a set of points in Switzerland, but 40 to 42 hours in the UK. Network Rail has to do far more far more efficiently, and until it does, it is not right that its top management should receive massive bonuses.

10.40 am

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): There can be no doubt that we are in a recession, and there is no doubt that the causes of that recession, like all recessions, are both international and domestic. I therefore congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on calling this debate, which allows us to look at some of the domestic implications of the recession.

I was pleased that I agreed with some of the points in the hon. Gentleman's speech. His view that the recession is unlikely to have bottomed out is certainly borne out by history. Recessions are not common, nor are quick recoveries from them. A return to trend growth after the last quarter of negative growth usually takes at least two years. It is therefore highly unlikely that we will see a quick recovery or that the recession will have a small impact on the rail industry and other industries. That is presumably why the Government acknowledged in the Red Book that the downturn is forecast to be much deeper than that of the 1990s.

I also agree—I think that the hon. Gentleman knows, although he did not mention this in his speech—that the PPP was the 14th of the 15 financing options that London Regional Transport presented to the Government, and Ministers chose to take that 14th option. Where I start to disagree with the hon. Gentleman, however, is that Metronet's failure was due not only to the economic incompetence of Metronet, but at least partly to the economic incompetence of Mayor Livingstone.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Gentleman has made an extraordinary allegation against Mayor Livingstone. He really should explain it to hon. Members or withdraw it.

Stephen Hammond: I am happy to explain it. It is widely acknowledged that Metronet believed that it was in a cost-plus contract and that Livingstone believed he was in a cost-inclusive contract, but neither side wished to test that point. There was economic incompetence on both sides.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Hammond: No, I have given the hon. Gentleman his chance.

It is important to recognise that there has also been a complete failure to acknowledge that the Government's franchising process has given rise to a number of the issues that the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington described and that they are not the fault of the TOCs. The Government are trying to rebalance the position between the fare payer and the taxpayer, and that is their decision, but it is also one reason why fares are going up. The Government's over-specification of the franchises is another reason why we are seeing increased job losses, because the specification of the contracts and the increasing premium payments have left franchisees with no other options.

I was intrigued by the speech by the hon. Member for Luton, North (Kelvin Hopkins), who said with relief, if I heard him correctly, that Network Rail had followed Railtrack and was effectively in public ownership. I am sure that the irony was not lost on everybody when he then went on more or less to rubbish the record of Network Rail, which, as he said, was effectively in public ownership.

Kelvin Hopkins: I said that it carried on with many of Railtrack's modes of operation. Instead of just being in public ownership, it should have operated as the equivalent body did under BR—as an integrated, properly publicly owned industry.

Stephen Hammond: Indeed, but the hon. Gentleman did say with relief that Network Rail was effectively in public hands—that we can agree on.

Last month's Budget from the then and, I guess, still current Chancellor announced a squeeze on public spending between April 2011 and 2014, so the line that it is only the Labour party that ever invests is clearly complete nonsense. Today's debate gives the Minister the possibility, in the context of the recession, to put on the record a number of the implications of the Chancellor's spending plans.

According to analysis by the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies, total investment spending will be cut by half across all Whitehall Departments to 2014. The Treasury's often optimistic forecasts predict that investment spending will fall by half by 2013. Even before the proposed budget tightening, the IFS predicted that the

Department for Transport's spending allocation would fall by 4 per cent. over the three years from 2011 to 2013. Given that a quick recovery is unlikely, will the Minister confirm the IFS numbers? In addition, the DFT will be forced to find its share of the Chancellor's announced £6 billion efficiency savings, which are independently estimated to represent 6 per cent. of current expenditure.

Given that we are in a recession, which will clearly impact on the railways, the Minister needs to answer a number of questions this morning. What size will the overall reduction in the DFT's budget be as a result of the 2011-14 spending plans? What size will the resulting reduction in investment spending and current spending be? What is the Department's judgment in terms of the balance between current and capital spending? Does it have any plans—this relates directly to the point made by the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker)—to review control period 4, which is being talked about in the industrial press? Electrification has also been mentioned, and I want to ask about its future because it has been widely suggested in the rail industrial press that the rolling electrification programme is one of the programmes that might, as the euphemism goes, be pushed to the right. The Government need to clarify those points, which are the direct implications for transport spending of the Chancellor's Budget.

Another key question that the Government need to answer today relates to the implications and problems beyond 2014. The Budget's predictions suggest a major decline in possible spending. Does the Minister realise that the Government's spending proposals in the Budget have left considerable uncertainty across the rail industry?

Time is relatively short, but I want to put it on the record that the Government's focus is all wrong. The Department has been working far too much on the minutiae, such as details of timetables and train specifications—on his trip, Lord Adonis even had a chance to look at the restaurant car menus. Such things should be left to the industry. The Department needs to concentrate its resources on the strategic direction. That was picked up in a Public Accounts Committee report, which said explicitly that the franchising process

"does not consider damaging side effects"

for customers.

The Committee also said that the Government could have a major impact on procurement. I totally disagree with how they are going about procurement. The Committee's report states that:

"promises of bringing 1,300 new rail carriages into service by 2014 look over-optimistic."

Analysis in answers to parliamentary questions to the Minister shows that only 973 of those carriages are likely to be extra carriages, and that the rest are part of the Thameslink growth programme, which the Minister's predecessor rolled out.

I agree that shorter franchises and the whole franchising process bear a major part of the blame for what has happened. Longer franchises are at least part of the remedy. Clearly, a number of passenger criteria, as well as punctuality and service levels, will need to be set out in the franchises. However, it is also clear that longer franchises must be part of the answer.

Norman Baker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Hammond: I am sorry but I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman as I only have a minute left.

In the very short time remaining I want to concentrate on franchises, because it is an issue that has been raised a number of times today. Is the DFT going to stick to its mantra that it will not renegotiate franchises? If so, is the DFT, as the hon. Member for Lewes was going to say, prepared to offer fixed-fee contracts? If it does take contracts back in-house, does it intend to keep them in the public sector or to re-franchise them within six months? Finally, does the DFT recognise that the much talked about cross-default option is, in reality, not open to it, because if it takes the contract back in-house, that will not affect the holding company level, so the cross-default option will not be available to the Government?

I note, unfortunately, that my time has run out, but I hope that the Minister might answer at least some of those detailed questions about the franchising process.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Clark): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this debate. This issue is very important to the Government in terms of ensuring that the railway system is sufficiently robust to meet the requirements of the travelling public and of the movement of goods through freight operations.

I will endeavour to cover as many of the points that have been raised as possible, but let me say first that some of the comments made and the views expressed about the railway system seem at odds with the reality. Out there, the reality is that more people are using rail services than at any time since the end of the second world war—since 1946, in fact. We have greater investment, punctuality, reliability, service, safety and operating rolling stock. Indeed, one of the pleasant challenges that we face is dealing with the fact that we have great demand for railway services. Nevertheless, of course the economic downturn is going to affect the railways, as it is affecting every other type of transport and other industries.

It is interesting that the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) wants to discuss records of investment. If I am quoting him correctly, he said that it is now "false" that only a Labour Government will invest. One only need go back to recessions of the 1980s and 1990s to see that the railways are in a far better position today than they were in those days. In 1982, the railways were at their lowest point, with the lowest number of passenger journeys, the lowest number of passenger miles travelled and the lowest passenger revenue. The conclusion of the Administration at that time was to see what report could be introduced to try to delay the terminal decline of the railways. That Administration came up with proposals that would have seen wholesale line closures and the slashing of route mileage by more than 80 per cent.

Fortunately for us today, that view did not prevail. However, railways were still not invested in, which remained the position when we came to the 1990s and a further recession, which meant further problems. It is against that backdrop that we must view the situation. We then had a botched privatisation process, which continued the legacy of under-investment. We have had to deal with that legacy since 1997 in trying to address the problems on the railways. Now, we have had

[Paul Clark]

a growing railway system for more than a decade, with increasing performance, reliability and customer satisfaction.

However, there are still challenges to be met and they must be met within this recession period. Of course, that is why we have continued to invest—to ensure that we have a robust railway system within the existing framework. That is also why we have announced £10 billion of investment to increase capacity for the next control period, for an extra 183 million passenger journeys between 2009 and 2014. Let us recognise the substantial investment that has been brought into the system by both private and public resources.

Mr. Drew: I will not talk about Swindon and Camborne because I know that that is outside this debate. However, can the Minister confirm that that £10 billion is on track? I apologise for the pun there. Obviously, that £10 billion is a key counter-cyclical factor in extending the network, including opening up new lines and improving existing ones.

Paul Clark: The Government's actions, such as bringing forward fiscal stimulus packages at the pre-Budget report to invest in public transport, including the railway programme, show our commitment to ensuring that that investment continues at this time. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) said that it is at exactly this time that we should keep such investment going, and we would not disagree one iota with that view. Actions speak louder than words, but we have put on the record our commitment to bringing forward and continuing with investment to address the immediate issues relating to capacity on our railways. That is in contrast with the proposal of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Osborne), the shadow Chancellor, who would have lopped some £840 million off the transport budget from April 2009. So we take no lessons about investment—

Stephen Hammond: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Clark: I will not give way because I only have four minutes left and I want to cover some of the points that have been made.

I want to talk about the issue of franchises, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington and the hon. Member for Lewes (Norman Baker). The hon. Gentleman asked whether we were going to play "hardball" with the operators to ensure that they deliver on their franchise requirements. That is our position exactly: we will ensure that the operators meet the franchise requirements. That is also why I say, as Lord Adonis has already said, that we are not in the game of renegotiating franchises.

Having said that, however, there is the question of a management contract, if required. What happened with Great North Eastern Railway is on public record, and there is nothing different in what I say now. There was a management contract, and as I am sure hon. Members are well aware, under section 30 of the Railways Act 1993, which was amended by the Railways Act 2005, there is a requirement on the Secretary of State to operate as "operator of last resort" if need be. However, the issue is ensuring continuity of the services that are required. We see that as being the important point—making sure that customers are put first when there are problems.

It has been said that only in the bad times do we have to bail out the companies, while they reap all the benefits in the good times. That is not how it works. In fact, in the good times the taxpayer shares in any revenue increases, and in the downturn there is a requirement for us to make up a percentage of the revenue gap. However, that provision applies only in the last year of a four-year franchise.

Opposition Members have talked about longer franchises. Having longer franchises would also mean having to predict revenues over 15 to 20 years, which makes matters extremely difficult.

John McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Clark: I will not give way.

In addition, longer franchises would also raise further questions about our ability to ensure that we hold operators to account over any difficulties.

We recognise that the issue of fares, including getting the balance right between the fare payer and the taxpayer, is absolutely critical. The hon. Member for Lewes quoted from what Lord Adonis said to the Transport Committee about sticking by the RPI plus 1 per cent. formula. Of course, Lord Adonis went on to confirm that we are going to take away the flexibility that allows regulated fares to increase by up to a further 5 per cent. Furthermore, he said that, with negative RPI, we will expect rail operators to reduce their prices and not just freeze them from January 2010.

There was a lot of speculation about what the scale of job losses might be, and I recognise the issues that will be faced. On investment and renewals, everyone is well aware of Network Rail's investment commitment. The package for 2009-10 is similar to that for 2008-09, but it is designed to achieve improvement in productivity by, for example, using modulus point sets so that we can get better turnaround. That is why there has been a re-profiling.

Other issues were raised that I would have liked to deal with, but I was not given the time to respond. We continue to invest in the industry and we will continue to invest for passengers.

Stroke Services (Ealing and Southall)

11 am

Mr. Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the important issue of stroke services in my constituency in Ealing and Southall. I will come quickly to the point and say that my concerns centre on the recent Healthcare for London proposals for stroke services in London. If proceeded with, those proposals will result in the closure of Ealing hospital's stroke unit. I hope today's debate will give the Minister good reason to get Healthcare for London to think again about those proposals, and designate Ealing hospital as a local stroke unit for patients to return to after treatment at a hyper-acute stroke unit.

During the consultation on Healthcare for London's proposals that ended in early May this year, it became clear that there was significant local opposition to the closure of the unit. Many constituents, local health practitioners, local councillors, clinicians and the hospital management contacted me with serious concerns about the impact of such a closure on the local community. Of particular concern were the extra journey times that my constituents would face both as patients and as visiting relatives. That was because under the new proposals, patients would be treated in the first instance at either Northwick Park or Charing Cross hyper-acute stroke units, or subsequently at Hillingdon or West Middlesex stroke unit, which I understand is in the Minister's constituency.

The recent early-day motion that I sponsored highlighted the fact that 170 people died from strokes in Ealing in 2006-07. In the same year there were approximately 1,600 admissions to hospital for stroke-related conditions, with admissions from wards in Southall running at twice the national level. There are 4,000 people in Ealing who have had a stroke at some time.

It is well known that people of south Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin have a higher incidence of stroke, and both those groups are well represented among my constituents. The figures also show that the correlation between age, ethnicity and the incidence of stroke is disproportionately high among south Asian, Afro-Caribbean and other non-white ethnic groups, regarding people who have a stroke before the age of 60. Given those figures and trends, it seems unwise not to have a stroke unit at Ealing hospital, which is geographically positioned in the middle of my constituency. Stroke is a major killer in this country, disproportionately so among my constituents. Major improvements in the treatment of strokes have been made in recent years, and Ealing hospital has invested in better facilities to treat stroke patients. The latest independent assessments of stroke services at Ealing hospital show that in the main categories of stroke treatment, it is in the top 25 per cent. of the country. The hospital also stands ready to work with Healthcare for London to ensure that it can reach the highest standards that a designated stroke unit would need to attain by 2011.

If there is no stroke unit at Ealing, residents from Ealing and Southall will be sent from the hyper-acute stroke unit to Hillingdon or West Middlesex hospitals for stroke unit care, even if they have had no previous contact with those hospitals. The proposed HASUs at Charing Cross and Northwick Park have already expressed concerns about their ability to repatriate Ealing residents in a timely fashion if there is no stroke unit at Ealing hospital. If patients cannot be moved from the HASUs efficiently, the hospitals might have to close to new admissions and the London ambulance service would have to take patients to HASUs in other parts of London.

The Healthcare for London consultation document states that the patient capacity supplied by Ealing hospital is "not required". Healthcare for London has indicated at recent meetings that final decisions on capacity have not yet been made, and that designated stroke units will be asked to provide information on how many beds they will provide. I am concerned that the current plans will not have the capacity to deal with Ealing's stroke patients.

If there is no stroke unit at Ealing, that will have serious implications for the running of other local services in the hospital and in the community. There are specialist acute services and procedures available at Ealing hospital trust that will be under threat if the stroke unit is removed. Those include acute surgery and coronary angiography. Patients undergoing those procedures have an increased risk of stroke, and the removal of an on-site stroke unit means that if they suffer a stroke as a complication of their treatment, optimal subsequent management might be compromised. If a patient has a stroke while in hospital, they will be unable to access immediate stroke care, which would significantly worsen the outcome. They would have to be transferred away from Ealing for further management. Access to key therapists, such as speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists will also be impaired, as they will not be available on site.

I and many of my constituents are deeply concerned about the proposal to close the stroke unit at Ealing hospital. I ask the Minister to work with Healthcare for London to find a way to provide those services for my constituents at their local hospital. The preferred option, which I believe is viable, would be to keep the stroke unit open under the management of Ealing hospital. If that is not possible, it is essential that a stroke unit is on the Ealing site under the management of one of the other designated stroke service providers.

I am sure that there is a positive way forward on this vital issue for the health of my constituents and I ask the Minister to do all she can to help to find a solution. I thank her for coming today and look forward to her reply.

11.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ann Keen): I congratulate my dear friend the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Sharma) on securing this debate. It is also a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr. Bayley.

I know that for many years, even prior to his well-earned election to Parliament, my hon. Friend has shown a great interest in the welfare of his local health services and the future of stroke services at Ealing hospital. I commend the dedication with which he serves the needs of his constituents.

On average, someone suffers from a stroke every five minutes in England. There may be people in this room who have been touched by a stroke that affected either them or members of their family. Behind that unfortunate

[Ann Keen]

statistic, however, lies a terrific cost for the NHS. At any one time, a quarter of all long-term beds are occupied by stroke patients. As those who care for their loved ones will testify, stroke survivors need long-term care and attention. In my many years as a nurse, I worked with stroke survivors and know the importance of dedication and continual rehabilitation, with staff trying so hard to bring quality back to once active lives. When sudden emergency hits, it is quite devastating—and it affects not only the stroke sufferer but of course the family.

To universal acclaim, the need for long-term care was recognised in the Department of Health's 2007 national stroke strategy. The strategy underlined the impossibility of furnishing every accident and emergency department with a 24-hour stroke consultant service and open access to that all-important CT scanner. There simply are not enough people with the right skills to do it safely. The Royal College of Physicians and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence both agree.

A and E is not the best place to treat stroke, and getting stroke patients directly to specialist units will put us in a position where more lives can be saved, which is what we want. Having worked in accident and emergency, I know that it is exactly what it says; to have people arriving after road accidents or particular traumas at the same time as someone who is suspected of having had a stroke can result in neglect to the stroke patient. Furthermore, the 2007 strategy document recommends that stroke services are co-ordinated into networks, supporting highly specialised centres of excellence. Networks have proven to be highly effective in treating cancer and heart disease, and we want to transfer and adapt that knowledge into the stroke strategy.

I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that the NHS responds to the national stroke strategy locally. NHS London is responsible for bringing stroke care for its population into the 21st century. At the moment, treatment throughout London varies radically. Each year about 11,500 stroke victims are admitted to hospital in London, 16 per cent. of whom die as a result of their stroke. There are outstanding examples of good practice, but we want to see them become the norm.

Consistent with national policy, the stroke strategy for London, published in November 2008, recommended that patients should be treated within three hours of having a stroke. To that end, stroke networks should comprise three vital elements. On the front line, the hyper-acute stroke units—HASUs—will provide an immediate response, with a CT scan and the appropriate drugs. Supporting stroke units will provide ongoing care and rehabilitation. Services for the mini-stroke—the transient ischaemic attack—will also provide rapid access to a specialist.

A consultation on the location of these services ran from 30 January to 8 May this year, and a remarkable 8,600 people responded. Taking account of those responses, a joint committee of primary care trusts will make a decision on 20 July about the location of stroke units across the whole of the capital.

Mr. Sharma: I am aware that consultation took place between January and the first week of May, but does the Minister have the figures? How many from Ealing and Southall responded to the consultation?

Ann Keen: I do not have the exact figures for that area to hand, but if statistics are available I will certainly let my hon. Friend have them.

As I said, a joint committee of PCTs will make a decision on 20 July about the location of stroke units. Under the PCTs' preferred proposals, residents of Ealing and Southall suffering strokes will be taken to Charing Cross or Northwick Park hospitals for improved care. I am told that that is the local PCT's preferred choice. The proposed locations of the HASUs will ensure that every Londoner is within 30 minutes of getting the treatment that they need. The PCTs anticipate that both Charing Cross and Northwick Park hospitals will also have stroke units. Depending on where they live, my hon. Friend's constituents will either remain at those hospitals for ongoing care or be transferred to Hillingdon or West Middlesex university hospitals.

I must tell my hon. Friend that Ealing hospital did not bid to offer hyper-acute stroke care. The trust instead submitted an application to offer secondary and mini-stroke care. Bids were assessed by an independent panel of stroke experts from outside London. The panel assessed each bid on its merits. Influenced directly by the independent panel, the consultation proposals state that Ealing hospital should no longer provide acute stroke services.

I know that it is important to my hon. Friend, so I repeat that no decision has been taken to stop the commissioning of stroke services from Ealing hospital. The recommendation was proposed in the consultation. We must wait for the PCTs' decision in July, so it remains a possibility that Ealing hospital could continue to provide stroke services. Indeed, as we speak, the trust and the local PCT are developing a proposal for delivering an effective, high-quality stroke service at Ealing hospital. The service would be part of the wider pan-London network. If that goal is achieved, the unit would have to meet the stringent Healthcare for London quality standards. The proposal is to inform the decision of the joint committee of PCTs in July.

Mr. Sharma: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I accept that further reports and proposals will be coming from the PCT. How many locally based voluntary sector health organisations—what we call the third sector—have been consulted? How many local GPs have been consulted, and how many other patients' groups have been consulted on proposals for the future and the vision for the local PCT and the health area in my constituency?

Ann Keen: That point was very well made. I am sure that the PCT and the chief executive will be able to furnish my hon. Friend with answers. I am aware that he has a good relationship with them and meets them regularly when working in his constituency. I feel confident that they will be able to inform him.

Thanks to the standards being applied in London, and regardless of the outcome of the joint committee's decision, Ealing's residents can expect to receive world-class care if they have the misfortune to be affected by stroke. On 1 April, PCTs began the phased implementation of the NHS health check. The programme will cover everyone between the ages of 40 and 74, and it will asses the risk of stroke, heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes. Everyone will receive a personal assessment, setting out their level of risk and saying exactly what they can do to reduce it.

Members of the south Asian population in my hon. Friend's constituency suffer strokes at a younger than average age, and many still of working age. The statistics are alarming. I know this from experience in my constituency, which is close to my hon. Friend's. I understand how important it is to get stroke victims out of hospital and back to work and back to their families. It is imperative that people in that age group have the highest quality care, should they have the misfortune to suffer a stroke, so that we do not waste working lives. For the family, the emotional and financial consequences are high. Every one of my hon. Friend's constituents will be within 30 minutes of that all-important hyper-acute stroke care. That speedy response will mean fewer people having their working life and their retirement marred by stroke.

The consultation does not propose the closure of any A and E departments or any loss of staff. Ealing hospital will continue to offer an extensive range of exceptional facilities for local residents. I realise that the first priority for all Londoners is to ensure that they have access to high quality care, and NHS London is working closely with the PCTs and other trusts involved to ensure enough beds and capacity for everyone.

My hon. Friend raised the secondary, but still important, concern about the time it takes for visitors to travel to the hospital. Although the new proposals will inevitably mean more travel for some, analysis has shown that average travel times will only increase from 31 to 42 minutes when travelling by public transport, and by three minutes when driving. I am not sure how those statistics were formulated, but I am sure he has as much faith in them as I do.

Mr. Sharma: I live in the area. In my earlier days, I worked as a bus conductor there. I travel by public transport daily. I am familiar, therefore, with travelling times from the Southall area to Ealing hospital as well as to Charing Cross and Northwick Park hospitals, which are miles away from Southall. Traffic congestion is a major problem in the area, and the reliability of public transport causes concern among my constituents. They feel that the times will be longer than was expected and quoted in the consultation.

Ann Keen: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about an area that I know very well too. Depending on what celebrations are taking place in Southall at the time, travelling through the area can take some considerable time, so I share some of his concerns. However, we must focus on the safety of patients when they arrive at hospital having had the misfortune to suffer a stroke. They need the best expert care. I would like to continue my reply in that fashion, and perhaps later we can have a conversation outside the Chamber about transport in Southall.

The development of a high quality stroke service is a work in progress. Each stroke unit will be expected to achieve standards of excellence that London has not yet experienced. We hope that the proposed improvements to stroke services will save as many as 400 lives a year and save thousands more from serious disability. We should concentrate on those statistics. I saw them in practice over many years as a health worker. The service throughout London will be greatly improved, which will benefit my hon. Friend's constituents.

The plans that I have outlined today are built on an outstanding dedication to the principle of patient and public involvement. More than 13,000 people visited 46 health fairs held in the capital throughout the consultation, and clinicians have been on hand to offer expert advice every step of the way. My hon. Friend's local hospital, council and residents have all participated fully in the consultation—a consultation that demonstrated widespread support for the general principles of change. As I said earlier, I shall try to provide him with the exact figures later.

A stroke is a medical emergency. The signs and symptoms of a heart attack are now very familiar to us all, but stroke is an attack on the brain and its treatment also requires expert advice, support and help as soon as possible. A swell of good work has already begun to roll out across the country. The number of under-75s dying from stroke has fallen by a third in the past 10 years, and although far from perfect, it is clear that a heroic effort has been made already by health professionals to save, and improve the quality of lives.

In addition to extra funding to PCTs, the Department of Health has guaranteed £105 million over the next three years to train more staff and raise awareness. I am sure my hon. Friend will have seen the hard-hitting and successful FAST—face, arms, speech and time—campaign launched this spring throughout the media. The campaign highlights the need to check the person's face immediately, to check whether they can raise their arms and whether their speech is affected and then, most vitally, to call 999. When that call is made to the ambulance service, the paramedics will then get that person to the appropriate unit as safely and as quickly as possible to save their life and enhance the quality of life afterwards. FAST will help public and professionals alike remember the symptoms and urgency of stroke.

Stroke is the third biggest killer in this country, and the largest single cause of severe disability. Men of south Asian origin and Bangladeshi and Pakistani women have a disproportionately high chance of suffering from a stroke, which is why stroke will remain at the top of the agenda for some time to come. I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to champion and support health services, and in particular, stroke services within his constituency. I know that he recently had a very positive meeting with the chief executive of Ealing PCT, whose work, and that of his PCT team, I also acknowledge.

Mr. Sharma: I would like to take the opportunity to thank Ealing PCT for campaigning on this issue. There are sometimes differences of view, but generally I am very pleased with the services that it offers, so I am grateful for the Minister's comments.

Ann Keen: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I urge my hon. Friend, however, not to be negative in some of his remarks or to raise unnecessary fears about the rest of the hospital and its staff, who are striving to achieve excellence, as he recognised. I encourage him to continue to engage with Ealing PCT and to fight for his constituents, as he does so well. We must all continue to improve stroke services for the benefit of his constituents and everyone else in the country.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

UK Aid (North Africa)

2.30 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Bayley, for calling me to speak in this important and topical debate. At Prime Minister's questions this afternoon, the Prime Minister gave his condolences to the family of Mr. Dyer, who was killed in Mali. Mr. Dyer, a British citizen, had been taken hostage on the Mali-Niger border and, regrettably, was killed by al-Qaeda operatives. The Prime Minister said to the House—I think that I am quoting him verbatim—"We will be giving every possible assistance to the President of Mali in trying to fight al-Qaeda and to help that country." I find that rather ironic. It shows just how good the Prime Minister is at spin because the reality is the Government have completely slashed our aid to north Africa. The House of Commons Library figures show that last year no money was spent on helping north African countries. Therefore, although the Prime Minister stood up and told the nation that he would do everything possible to help those countries, the reality—as always with this Government—is that there is no substance behind what he said.

I want to take the opportunity to challenge the thinking of the Department for International Development. In the past, challenging DFID was almost taboo. One was perceived as some sort of nutter, fanatic or extremist if one dared to challenge the great DFID and how it went about things. However, under difficult economic circumstances, the tide of public opinion is changing. People such as me, who have critical things to say about DFID, are a little more empowered and confident about challenging the Department and how it spends taxpayers' money.

DFID spends 90 per cent. of its resources in the poorest countries in the world. Some might say that that is very logical. Of course, we should be helping the poorest countries in the world, and not giving money to the very wealthy ones—I will come in a moment to some of the wealthy countries that get our aid. However, it means that middle-income countries receive only 10 per cent. of the budget. As the right hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), the Chairman of the Select Committee on International Development, has said, one in three of the world's population who survive on less than $1 a day live in middle-income countries. Yet those countries receive only 10 per cent. of our aid. I should like the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster) to address that issue. In the run-up to the next election, my hon. Friend and others in the Conservative party will talk about how to address that anomaly.

As I said, north Africa received nothing last year, according to the House of Commons Library. None the less, those countries are our neighbours and are of great strategic importance to the United Kingdom. When I was in business, before entering Parliament, I visited north African countries many times. They are extremely friendly towards the United Kingdom, very positive and [illegible]want to engage with us, but they are grappling with huge issues. Illegal immigrants from all parts of Africa use them as a conduit for trying to gain entry to Europe. They are also being used as a conduit for drugs as they are smuggled from Latin America, via Guinea-Bissau, through them and into Europe. They are also grappling with the terrible problem of terrorism and al-Qaeda. Mr. Dyer, our citizen, died as a result of that activity. I am very sad for his family.

As we speak, President Obama is en route to Egypt. He will make a major speech in Cairo tomorrow on the importance of the Arab world, and on the importance that he attaches to American relations with Egypt and the Arab League. Interestingly, whereas we give Egypt nothing, America gives it $1.5 billion a year. That is how seriously the Americans take Egypt. They understand the strategic importance of the country and of dealing with many of the issues that I have raised. That is why Americans give Egypt so much assistance.

As you know, Mr. Bayley, we are overstretched. As a country, we are borrowing billions of pounds, yet we can afford to give aid to China—more than £50 million—and we give more than £800 million to India. I do not see how we can justify expenditure in such other parts of the world. China, for example, is a very wealthy country: it has spent more than £20 billion on hosting the Olympic games, it has one of the largest armies in the world and a space programme. Yet we cannot give any money to north African countries, which are of strategic importance to the United Kingdom and are grappling with such serious issues.

I call on the Minister to assure me that aid to China will be stopped. The International Development Committee, of which I am a member, has endorsed the Government's strategy of giving money to China. I fundamentally disagree with that, and I believe that the aid that we give to India should be reviewed as well. Interestingly, I appeared in an article in *The Telegraph*—not our *Daily Telegraph* I hasten to add, but the one in India. I made the front page when I called for aid to India to be cut. *The Telegraph* said what a fantastic MP I was. It said that I was the only one who was treating it seriously and with maturity. It said that I realised that it could look after itself without any assistance from the United Kingdom. I should love the Minister to look at a copy of the Indian newspaper because the journalists really supported my stance that India can go it alone and does not need financial assistance from Britain.

Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): The hon. Gentleman's point is very important and should be fully explored. He is talking about a strategy that we should have towards middle-income countries, but which does not exist. He is quite right in exposing some of the inconsistencies in who we do and do not support, and he makes his case very well. Nevertheless, does he not accept that the success of targeting our resources predominantly on poverty reduction in the poorest countries has lifted DFID into the world rankings as one of the most effective aid agencies delivering poverty reduction? That does not undermine his argument, but it is important that he acknowledges that achievement.

Daniel Kawczynski: I agree. There is a lot that DFID does very well indeed, and it has very good branding around the world. I do not doubt the passion and sincerity of the people in DFID in the UK and around the world. When we visited Tanzania and Kenya we saw the passion for ourselves and just how committed those people are in assisting the world's poorest. But as an Opposition MP it is not my job to smooth their feathers. My job is to scrutinise and assess some of the areas for development.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about poverty in middle-income countries, but surely he recognises that in absolute numbers, the poverty levels in India outstrip those in almost any other country in the world. While there is an issue about misuse of aid and inappropriate aid, there is surely an overwhelming case for the provision of aid to the very poorest in India to help development. The numbers are phenomenal compared with those in any other part of the world.

Daniel Kawczynski: My answer is that we give India more than £840 million a year. The sheer scale of that worries me. I will come to some of the serious problems that north African countries have, but if we slice too much of the cake off for India, there will be nothing left for north Africa. The King of Lesotho spent more money on his 36th birthday celebrations than the entire UK aid budget for his country three years ago. I have made that point repeatedly in the House. Frankly, I am appalled that when my constituents are facing difficulties with hospital services and suchlike, there are stories in the press that the King of Lesotho can spend on lavish celebrations for his 36th birthday more than we give to his country every year in aid.

What really upset me when the Committee visited Kenya, which receives £50 million a year, and Tanzania, which receives more than £150 million a year—I hope that you will accept the relevance of this, Mr. Bayley, and I will talk very soon about north Africa—is that there was no British branding. I have said that to the right hon. Member for Gordon.

When we finally get aid to north Africa, whether under this Labour Government or the next Conservative Government—I am saying this with equal force to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Milton Keynes—it must have some form of British branding. There are no British flags or symbols—there is nothing—associated with the aid. It is so bad that the people in the village of North Horr in northern Kenya to whom I spoke thought that the aid was from France, because a group of French youngsters called Solidarité, to whom DFID had outsourced the work, were implementing it.

I have been told that when the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short) became Secretary of State she insisted, following scandals such as the Pergau dam incident, that there should be no linkage between DFID spending and British branding, so that we could not be perceived as trying to influence foreign Governments. The pendulum has, however, swung too far the other way when we send aid to countries and there is no link in the minds of the people who benefit from it that it has come from British taxpayers, that Britain feels strongly about supporting them or that Britain will continue to play such a vital role. Why should we hide our passion about helping others? Why should we not be proud, and state what we as a country are doing, rather than trying to keep it under wraps?

Malcolm Bruce: I hope that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges for the record that the Committee has just published our report "Aid Under Pressure", in which we specifically ask the Government to revisit the issue of British identity in the name of the Department. Of course, the Minister or the Department will have time to reply over the next two months, but it is important to say that the Committee has specifically asked the Government to address the issue.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am extremely grateful that our Committee has done that formally, and I look forward to the Minister's reply. Some members of the Committee may not agree, but I think that some of the things that we saw in Kenya could quite easily have been done with microfinance. I hope that those projects will not receive so much money in future and that we can spend more of the money on helping north Africa. Interestingly, we met the Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs in Tanzania, which receives £150 million a year, and I had serious concerns—again, other hon. Members may disagree—about his lack of a coherent strategy for improving his country's situation.

You will be pleased, Mr. Bayley, that I shall now talk specifically about north Africa, and first about the country for which I have a great deal of passion: Libya. I am chairman of the all-party group on Libya and I am desperately passionate about improving relations and trade with the country. I have frequent meetings with Mr. Jelban, the Libyan chargé d'affaires, who will soon become the ambassador and who does an excellent job promoting his country in the United Kingdom.

I led a delegation to Tripoli in September 2007 for the 38th anniversary celebrations of Colonel Gaddafi coming to power and will lead another delegation to the city on 1 September this year with Lord Steel of Aikwood—one of my favourite Lib Dems—and others when we celebrate the 40th anniversary. We will all remember the scenes from watching the BBC of the former Prime Minister, Mr. Blair, meeting Gaddafi in the tent. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall at those discussions.

Jeremy Corbyn: Canvas.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am sorry; I wish I could have been a fly on the canvas.

Mr. Blair and Colonel Gaddafi talked about weapons of mass destruction, and various promises were made to get Libya to move away from its isolationist policies. What promises were made to Libya? When I led the delegation to Tripoli two years ago, officials at the Ministry of Health and Environment and the Minister himself stated that various categorical assurances were given by Mr. Blair that there would be specific, concrete assistance for Libya's health service. They were told that the NHS would directly engage with the Libyan health service, and that there would be help, particularly for the hospital in Benghazi. We all know of the case of the children who tragically contracted HIV. Subsequently, the Bulgarian nurses were held under the ludicrous proposition that they had deliberately infected the children, which was totally wrong. Those children contracted HIV, regrettably, because of the poor sanitation and management of the hospitals in Benghazi. Mr. Blair made a specific pledge that help with management would be given.

Most importantly, the Libyan officials said that they want to learn from our experiences of running the NHS. They want our know-how. They said that we have one of the best health services in the world and that they want to learn about it from us. What has happened?

[Daniel Kawczynski]

What is DFID doing to fulfil Mr. Blair's promise to Libya that assistance would be granted to the Libyan health services? They desperately need that help.

The Libyans dispose of their hospital waste, some of which is highly toxic, in the desert. They were promised assistance for an incinerator or other modern facility to dispose of that waste but none has been forthcoming. I worry that Mr. Blair has gone in there, all guns blazing, promising everything, and then nothing has happened. He got them to give up their weapons of mass destruction, but all the titbits he promised in exchange have not been delivered. What sort of a message does that send?

Libyan officials say to me, "We are rather miffed that all these promises were made and that none of them has been fulfilled." What does that say to other countries that we hope to entice away from weapons of mass destruction and isolationist policies? What if the Libyans go to Arab League meetings and say, "Don't listen to the British. They'll promise you the world and then not fulfil it"? That is of great concern.

Also, Libya is chair of the African Union this year and is doing important work in the role. There will be a major conference in Sirte from 1 to 3 July. Will the Minister confirm that someone from DFID will be sent to act as an observer?

Italy, interestingly, recently signed a contract with Libya to provide it with $250 million a year for 20 years to assist with infrastructure projects, such as construction of motorways and a railway from Tripoli to Benghazi, and all sorts of vital, pivotal projects to do with hospitals and education. I do not agree with Mr. Berlusconi on many things, but I applaud that stance and his commitment to assistance for Libya.

Illegal immigration is a huge issue for Libyans to deal with. People from the whole of west Africa trying to secure illegal passage to Europe use Tripoli as a transit point. As a result, crime has gone up on the streets of Tripoli and there is huge pressure on resources. The Libyans are not responsible for that. It is a side effect of so many people trying to get into Europe illegally. They go from Tripoli to the Italian island of Lampedusa, and to Malta.

The Minister will know of the human suffering that such people go through. He will have seen the scenes of chaos on the BBC, with people drowning in the boats. He will have seen the state in which they reach Europe, how dehydrated they are and how they have been abused by human traffickers along the way. It is human tragedy of the most profound magnitude. What is the Department doing to assist countries such as Libya in preventing this human misery from happening?

Yesterday afternoon, I spoke to our ambassador in Tripoli, Sir Vincent Fean, who does an excellent job. He spoke of the detention camps in Tripoli that people are sent back to when they are caught on the high seas. The conditions are extremely poor and there is bad sanitation. I hope that the Minister will approach the Libyans and tell them that we will do all we can to help them with management and sanitation in the centres, so that the people who regrettably find themselves in them do not suffer as much.

Jeremy Corbyn: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about the tragedy, misery and horror of the lives of the many people who try to cross the Mediterranean. Hundreds die in the process. It is a testament to our times that so many people die in that horror. In addition to helping Libya with this matter, does he agree that it is more important to do something about the poverty in the central African countries that the people come from? A combination of aspects such as environmental change and economic policies has led to this dreadful human tide of misery and poverty, with so many dying in the process of trying to find somewhere to live.

Daniel Kawczynski: Absolutely. I concur with that. This debate is about north Africa primarily, but countries in that region are affected by their southern neighbours. I will refer to questions that the hon. Gentleman has asked about Western Sahara, among other things. I applaud his work on raising those issues with the Government.

The issue of illegal immigration will be magnified tremendously over the next 10 years unless something is done. My understanding is—unless the Minister can contradict this—that we give Libya zero financial assistance in this matter.

The answers I have received to parliamentary questions on this issue have always taken a Sir Humphrey Appleby-type approach. They say things like, "The EU is sorting it all out", or "We're sending some money to the EU for part of another little EU budget". That is simply not good enough. Frankly, I do not want to know what the EU is doing. I want to know what the British Government are doing. I do not want the British Government to shirk their responsibilities by saying, "We are giving a certain amount of money to the EU, which is doing X, Y and Z". That may be fine for the Minister's meetings with his counterparts in Brussels, but this is the British Parliament. We want to hear what the British Government are doing directly, rather than listening to what the EU is doing. If I wanted to know what the EU was doing, I would take the Eurostar to Brussels and ask it directly.

Libya still faces the huge issue of refugees from Darfur. The hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) has asked many questions on Sudan and Darfur. People are so desperate to escape the torture, brutality, rape and killings in Darfur that they cross the arid, barren and deserted Libyan-Sudanese border in their hundreds and thousands. They make their way to Tripoli seeking sanctuary.

I visited Darfur with my favourite Lib Dem, Lord Steel, and the former leader of the Conservative party, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). It was the most tragic and heartbreaking experience I have ever been through. I never experienced anything like it as a businessman before I entered this place. It shook me to my bones to meet the people in Darfur and to see what had happened to them and the conditions they live in. The only help I saw in refugee camps in Darfur was from international non-governmental organisations. I could see nothing directly from DFID. The Minister may contradict that and I hope that he can.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is being a bit unfair. A massive amount of resources go into Darfur from DFID. They cannot go

in directly for many reasons—not least because our NGOs have been expelled from Darfur. That is a ringing indictment of the Government in Khartoum. He is being unfair because we have invested heavily. The problem is that peace is as far away as it ever was.

Daniel Kawczynski: If that is the case, as a parliamentarian I look forward to hearing directly from the Minister what the Government are doing specifically and directly to help the people of Darfur.

I had the opportunity to meet President Omar al-Bashir in his gilded palace in Khartoum and to tackle him on the suffering of his people. It was one of the most unpleasant meetings I have experienced. He said that there were no problems and tried to fob us off. Being surrounded by 50 bodyguards holding pistols was not conducive to tackling him. He has been indicted for war crimes and, as the hon. Member for Stroud said, he has thrown out the aid agencies. What will DFID do to put pressure on the Sudanese Government to ensure that the agencies that fulfil this vital job are allowed back in?

I am conscious of the time, Mr Bayley, and will finish as soon as I can.

I turn now to Egypt. As I said, the United States gives $1.5 billion dollars a year to Egypt, but 40 per cent. of Egyptians live in poverty according to United Nations figures. Yet we give nothing to Egypt. That takes us back to the point that the right hon. Member for Gordon made about the strategy of helping middle-income countries.

Together with Dr. Wafik Moustafa, I chair the Conservative Arab Network. It has looked at statistics relating to Gaza in preparation for this debate, and today I received the following information. The funding pledged to Gaza, per capita, for March alone is almost equal to the entire annual GDP per capita of Egypt. The number of doctors and dentists per capita in Gaza and the west bank is approximately four times higher than in Egypt. The infant mortality rate is approximately 20 per cent. higher in Egypt than in Palestinian areas. Those are all United Nations statistics. The Conservative Arab Network stated:

"Yet the funding will support a terrorist regime with obscene human rights abuses (Hamas) whereas Egypt is actively working to stop and limit"

these extremists, but gets little funding.

Again, I disagree with things said in my Select Committee's report about the Gaza strip. Why is there such a difference in funding? I do not object to British taxpayers' money being spent to help the people of Gaza, particularly after the recent suffering and bombardments. However, why is there such a huge difference between the funding for Gaza on one side of the border, and Egypt on the other, when Egypt needs to play such a major part in the solutions to the problems?

Yesterday, I spoke to the shadow Foreign Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), about Morocco in preparation for this debate. He met the Moroccan ambassador yesterday, and said that he was extremely positive and wanted to interact more and have greater contact with DFID, to challenge the French dominance in that part of the world. The Minister will know that Ceuta and Melilla are two Spanish enclaves in Morocco. I visited Ceuta, which is a fortress, when I was in business, and it is totally surrounded by barbed wire and surveillance equipment to prevent people from sneaking into that European enclave. Morocco faces huge issues with immigration and drugs as a result of people being smuggled from west Africa, through Morocco, to the Canary Islands and Spain. What help will we give to Morocco to stop that?

Aid should be about helping people, but it should also be of strategic importance to the UK. I keep going back to this because I feel so passionately about it. Yes, we should help the poorest people in the world, but we should start to think about what strategic value there can be for the UK and how we can kill two birds with one stone. How can we help the poor people but also tackle illegal immigration and the suffering of people being smuggled to Europe illegally? The Democratic Republic of the Congo has an identical GDP per capita to Morocco, but it is ranked 10th highest for bilateral aid, whereas Morocco gets nothing.

The hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) has asked relevant questions about what assistance the Department is providing for refugees from Western Sahara in refugee camps in Algeria. This issue is of great importance. He will know that, in 1990, the United Nations wanted to ensure that the Polisario in Western Sahara had the right to self-determination, but unfortunately, Morocco still occupies the country and there is a lot of suffering in the refugee camps in Algeria. I would like the Minister to tell us what is happening there and how he is working with the Foreign Office to help the Polisario refugees in those camps. How is he trying to resolve that long-standing sore and mediate in a situation that has been going on for decades, resulting in tremendous suffering for those people of Western Sahara?

On Mauritania, migration from the port of Nouadhibou to the Canary Islands is a huge issue, and we have seen reports in the national press about the suffering of those people. Tourists from my constituency and others go to the Canary Islands on their annual holidays, and when they are lying on the beach they suddenly see people who are totally dehydrated and near death being deposited. Many of the boats sink, and those people drown. I am not prepared to allow that travesty to continue, and I am shocked and baffled as to the lack of discussion about this human tragedy. People in all parties must be concerned about what is happening to those people and the suffering they are going through. This is not a political issue, so we must put party politics aside and focus on how to help Mauritania and other countries to prevent this human suffering.

The countries of north Africa are extremely friendly nations. My experience of them in business has been that they are extremely pro-British. They are trying to fight fundamentalism and terrorism, and they are of huge strategic importance to us. We have heard from President Sarkozy and others in the European Union how they hope to bring them into the EU fold with greater trading agreements and assistance, but I want to know what we in the UK are doing directly to help them with aid for refugees who are suffering in relation to migration issues.

I am chairman, as I said, of the Conservative Arab Network, and we are having our inaugural event at the House of Commons on 30 June. There are 500,000 British Arabs in the United Kingdom, but not a single one in either Chamber in our Parliament—an anomaly

[Daniel Kawczynski]

that I hope will be rectified. We need to engage with the British Arab community, who are prevalent in London and throughout the UK. One way of engaging with them is by showing them the interest that we have in north Africa and the Arab world, as well as how we are helping people who might even be their relatives, in certain cases, and how we are trying to tackle some of the appalling problems that they have.

I have asked quite a few written parliamentary questions on this issue in the past few years, which I am looking through now. The right hon. Member for Leeds, West (John Battle), who sits on our Select Committee, has also asked some very pertinent questions. He asked what contribution the Department has made to increasing food aid to Egypt since March 2006, and whether the Secretary of State would make a statement on that, but DFID's response to that question was so Humphrey Applebyesque that it was meaningless. I find that so frustrating. The reply stated:

"The Department for International Development (DFID) does not have a bilateral programme in Egypt. DFID, however, continues to support poverty reduction efforts in Egypt through contributions to international institutions such as the European Commission (EC). The UK is contributing about €95 million towards the EC's €558 million 2007 to 2010 programme of assistance to Egypt. DFID has also been in regular contact with the World Food Programme (WFP) and has responded to their recent global appeal for countries most at risk from rising food prices with a £30 million contribution. There was no specific appeal for Egypt, where the WFP operates capacity building programmes and school feeding programmes but has no emergency operations."—[*Official Report*, 12 June 2008; Vol. 477, c. 441W.]

Again, the Government are saying, "We are giving a little bit of money to this and a little bit of money to that." I very much hope that we stop giving a little bit of money to this and that, and start interacting and engaging directly with these countries and try to help them directly.

Finally, let me point out that DFID's bilateral aid expenditure to north Africa fell from just £3.5 million in 2003-04—I do not know how to describe that figure without being rude: £3.5 million for the whole of north Africa!—to about £500,000 in 2005-06, and then to zero in 2007-08. When spending by other Departments is included, aid to north Africa was £38.1 million in 2003-04, falling to £2.8 million in 2007-08, so the entire contribution of not only DFID but all Departments was a squalid £2.8 million in 2007-08. Those figures are from the Library. That contribution represented 0.2 per cent. of total aid from the UK to Africa as a whole, but there are hundreds of millions of people in that region. That goes back to an earlier point. The Department also estimated the UK share of multilateral expenditure in northern Africa to be around £50 million in 2006-07, and there are no data for 2007-08.

I am delighted to have had this opportunity to get a lot of things off my chest. From what I have seen, the Minister does a very good job, and I very much hope that he will explain to me what his Department is doing on some of the matters I have raised. I hope that he will leave the debate having seen the passion that I have for north Africa, because I passionately feel that helping it will ultimately help our own country. No matter how difficult the economic situation becomes, I hope that the Minister and his Conservative and Liberal Democrat shadows will not forget north Africa or that we must help countries such as Egypt and Libya to deal with some of the terrible human suffering that they face.

Hugh Bayley (in the Chair): I would like us to commence the winding-up speeches at 3.30 pm. I am happy to call Jeremy Corbyn.

3.10 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I am pleased that we are having this debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing it. North Africa is not a part of the world that is often discussed in an holistic way, and it is good that we can do that today.

As with all such debates, the problem is whether the reply should come from DFID or the Foreign Office. The Minister, who is from DFID, will clearly have difficulty responding on foreign policy issues, and I suspect that we will get letters from the relevant Departments after the debate. Inevitably, the issues that we are raising will cut across the work of both Departments.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham made some extremely important points about migrant peoples travelling through north Africa. It is unbelievable that most British newspapers and broadcast media seldom report the daily toll of misery and suffering that is the lot of so many people from sub-Saharan Africa. These people do their best to travel through the Sahara or the countries on each of the coasts to reach north Africa, before trying to get across the Mediterranean to Greece, Italy, Malta, Cyprus, Spain or the Canary Islands. Indeed, there is more publicity when tourists are inconvenienced because poor, benighted people from sinking vessels have been washed up on the beaches of the Canary Islands. Such things are at the sharp end of the gap between the richest and the poorest on our planet, and they are an indictment of us all.

Children in our schools are rightly taught about the heroism of people in the 19th and 20th centuries who managed to travel to different parts of the world to succeed, survive or gain political asylum. I suspect that our grandchildren and their children will read about the heroism of those who managed to escape desperate poverty in central Africa to get to Europe or north America to survive. There is a daily story there, but it is simply not being reported.

I recognise what the hon. Gentleman said about the camps in Libya, Morocco and the fortresses of Ceuta and Melilla—the Spanish enclaves that are designed to keep migrants out. However, the issue goes much deeper. The economic policies that are adopted by, or forced on, very poor countries in central Africa lead to rural depopulation, urban poverty and the loss of public services and education. As a result, the only route out of poverty for many people is to escape somewhere else. Those who do end up working illegally in Europe so that they can send small sums back home, some of which are stolen by moneylenders on the way. These are extremely serious issues, and it would be helpful if the debate highlighted them.

Mr. Drew: I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend says. The situation is made that much worse by conflict, which often originates with the desire to drive out an

ethnic group that may not fit into a region's or country's wider make-up. That is exactly what we had in Darfur.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is an enormous ethnic dimension to many of these conflicts. People are driven out of a region because they have a different ethnicity from the majority. Equally, people can be victims of environmental disaster. The galloping expansion of the Sahara desert in all directions means that cropping and herding are simply unsustainable as forms of agriculture, so people have to go somewhere else. When they do, they are not welcome because there is already pressure there on the remaining resources and bits of land, which leads to conflict. There is not one simple explanation behind such events, but a series of complexities. For the good of all of us, we should concentrate far more on such issues and on the needs of those involved, and I am pleased that we are at least having a debate about them today.

As the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, I am quite involved in the issue of Western Sahara. Indeed, I am the chair of the all-party group on Western Sahara, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) is our secretary—I have just promoted him. The group exists to highlight a fundamental injustice, which reflects not only on our foreign policy, but quite strongly on European policy and trade arrangements. The hon. Gentleman was right that British aid to north Africa is extremely limited. Such aid as is provided is disbursed through the European Union, the UN and non-governmental organisations, with a small amount being disbursed directly.

The issue of Western Sahara and its refugees is the result of politics and political conflict, but the European Union manages quite deftly to operate in two entirely separate and different zones when it comes to Western Sahara and Morocco. There is an EU trading arrangement with Morocco, which includes a human rights clause. A large number of European companies are doing extremely well out of trade with Morocco, and I have no problem with trade with the country—I have no quarrel with Morocco in any way. However, I do have a problem when companies benefit from the resources of Western Sahara or the fish off its coast—that is a different issue altogether.

I do not want to go into the history of Western Sahara—that would take too long, and you have asked for Back-Bench speeches to stop by 3.30 pm, Mr. Bayley—but I do want to make a few brief points in parenthesis. In the 1950s, France ceased to be, in effect, a colonial power in Morocco. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Spain still occupied Western Sahara as a colony. Morocco supported the right of self-determination and, therefore, the option of independence for the Sahrawi people. Indeed, throughout the '60s and early '70s, Moroccan Ministers made plenty of speeches supporting the concept at African Union and other events.

The demise of the Franco regime and Spain's withdrawal from Western Sahara led not to what should have been an orderly process of decolonisation under the auspices of the UN, but to the occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania and to a war. Morocco, which was well equipped with weapons from America and other countries, drove the majority of the Sahrawi people out of Western Sahara and into Algeria.

The camps were established in the 1970s—40 years ago—and people then had to survive in them. Mauritania withdrew from its portion of Western Sahara, which became, in effect, the liberated zone. Ever since, about 150,000 people have been living in refugee camps in Algeria. Algeria has supported them and given them space to survive.

There should have been a UN-sponsored referendum to allow people to return to Western Sahara. There were years and years of argument about how to draw up an electoral roll. Morocco insisted that the people it had moved into Western Sahara as Moroccan settlers could vote in the referendum, which would clearly have negated the votes of the Sahrawi people living in the refugee camps. No referendum has been held.

The nearest that the situation ever came to some kind of development was the Baker plan. The former US Secretary of State James Baker convened a series of meetings and conferences at which he drew up a plan that was effectively a form of limited autonomy for Western Sahara, which would have involved its people going back and, at an indeterminate date—I think 10 years on—a referendum. The Polisario, the political leadership of Western Sahara, reluctantly accepted the plan—I was at the congress, in a big tent in the desert, when they did it—only to have it effectively vetoed by Morocco. We are back to square one and people living in refugee camps.

The UN organisation MINURSO has just had its mandate renewed by Security Council resolution 1871, of 30 April. Also, Christopher Ross, a former US diplomat, is undertaking a new round of negotiations. I hope that the British Government will do all that they can to support and facilitate those negotiations, but above all to recognise that it is not right that, 30 years on, the third generation of those who were driven into the camps are still living there. Imagine what it is like for a young person growing up in a refugee camp in Algeria, knowing that all they can dream about is the possibility of going to Western Sahara at some indeterminate point in the future. I pay tribute to the Polisario leadership for managing to hold the camps together and ensuring that sufficient aid gets through from the UN and other sources at least to feed people and provide medical care. The camps are extremely well run and are good communities, but they are still refugee camps, and are wrong and unnecessary.

I hope that the Minister will at least be able to give me some assurances: first, that our aid to MINURSO and to the camps will continue until it is no longer necessary, because people have a right to return; and that we will re-examine the EU relationship with Morocco. There is a human rights clause in the trade agreements, as there is in all EU trade agreements. Morocco, by its illegal occupation of Western Sahara, is in breach of that clause. It is simple: why are we not doing anything about it? Why, instead, are we offering enhanced associate status to Morocco, instead of telling it, "You must come to an accommodation with your neighbours and stop the illegal occupation"?

It gets worse, however. Western Sahara has phosphate resources and 3.5 million tonnes are turned out a year. Who buys it? Who benefits from it—which companies? Sure as heck, none of that wealth or money is going to the refugees who were driven out of Western Sahara all those years ago. Last year, the EU, to its discredit,

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concluded a fish agreement with Morocco, by which the abundant fish stocks in Western Sahara's Atlantic waters are now being harvested by Spanish and French companies, for the main part. They are making a great deal of money out of it. It is stolen property, as far as I am concerned, and I hope that something can be done about it, and that the Minister can give us good news about that.

At the UN in April, when the issue came up for debate, the southern African countries, and South Africa in particular, sent a very strong memorandum to the Security Council:

"It is of concern to us that for over three decades, the situation in Western Sahara remains unresolved. We would like to reiterate that for us, the Member States of SADC"

the Southern African Development Community—

"the struggle for the people of Western Sahara is a struggle for self-determination and indeed is based on the principles of decolonisation, promotion of human rights, international legality and the stability and security of the African continent. It is a struggle that people of our sub-region fully associate themselves with."

It is significant that the only self-determination issue in the whole of Africa that is recognised by the African Union is that of Western Sahara. It is recognised as Africa's last colony. It is up to us to stop recognising de facto Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and to start putting political and economic pressure on Morocco to withdraw.

Mr. Drew: The Polisario is clear—it has been announced today—about the fact that it partly blames Morocco for the very sad events concerning Mr. Dyer, because, of course, there is tacit support for the Salafist terrorist group, and it does not take a genius to work it out that one of the sub-Saharan countries is helping it. Polisario's allegation is that it is Morocco.

Jeremy Corbyn: That is indeed an important and serious allegation. We must be clearer in our relationship with Morocco and stronger in our diplomatic efforts to persuade it that if it wants to be accepted as a normal trading partner, with normal membership, the illegal occupation cannot be allowed to continue. The people of Western Sahara deserve better than that.

Last week I was at a conference in Madrid, organised by the Autonomous university of Madrid, attended by eminent lawyers and professors. We went through the legality of the situation, but also the simple human aspects, such as the march by women of Western Sahara alongside the sand wall, a heavily-mined "defence" facility constructed by Morocco. What is that about, apart from being a terrible waste of resources and an indictment of what illegal occupation and militarism bring us to? Let the people of Western Sahara go back and look after their own land, and live off the abundant resources that lie under it, and the fish in the sea beyond it. Otherwise, it will become the powder keg for yet another war, more killing and more misery.

3.26 pm

John Barrett (Edinburgh, West) (LD): I want to begin by expressing my condolences to Edwin Dyer's family, following the announcement during Prime Minister's Question Time that the Prime Minister had strong reason to believe that he had been murdered. Having read what has been put on the website of those responsible, I am left in no doubt that that, sadly, is the case. The case of Mr. Dyer—his being kidnapped and held in Mali and Niger, and his being sold on by local tribesmen to Algerian members of al-Qaeda—shows that several countries and terrorist groups in north Africa are at the heart of the problems of the region.

I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for obtaining the debate, because I served on the Select Committee on International Development, and I cannot remember there being a debate on aid to north Africa during those five or six years—or in my eight years in Parliament. In addition to the value of the hon. Gentleman's speech and that of the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), and the interventions, the debate itself was a good idea. I question some of the issues that the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham raised, but the very fact that that he raised them is good.

There are issues about giving overseas aid to middle-income countries, and there are other problems in considering the question of the poorest people in the world. The poorest people live in Africa, but the majority of poor people live not there, but in other countries, some of which are middle-income countries. There are 150 million people in Uttar Pradesh—one state of India—and 50 million of those live below the poverty line. African countries have much smaller populations, and individual states in India have 10 times their population. Uttar Pradesh has 10 times the population of Mali. There is a problem when DFID must decide where to tackle the requirements of those most in need; some of those who are most in need receive nothing. I think that is part of the point of the debate.

I am aware from previous visits that I have made that branding is an important issue. I was with the Chairman and other members of the Select Committee following the earthquake in Pakistan. New housing had been put up, funded by UK taxpayers but erected by Norwegians, and local people thought it was Norwegian housing. However, I understand that there are risks in attaching the UK flag to projects in some developing countries, because they can become targets for hostile groups. Often, as the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned, there are problems with host countries—not least Sudan—and the sending of direct UK aid; the aid must go through agencies. There is a problem in dealing with countries such as Sudan whose Governments are, as the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, part of the problem, not the solution.

Daniel Kawczynski: I agree that there are certain cases in which it would be controversial or difficult to shout from the rooftops that aid is from Britain. However, there are countries, such as Kenya, which I visited with the Select Committee, where it would be totally appropriate. The villagers we spoke to in the most northern village in Kenya that we visited said they were rather disappointed that they had not known that that was British aid. They feel a great empathy with Britain and were rather startled by how quiet we were about explaining what we were doing.

John Barrett: That reflects the view of the many people in Pakistan who asked why the British Government were not doing more, even though there is a huge

Pakistani community in this country. DFID had in fact done much work, but that was not known on the ground.

I am glad that this debate is taking place. Sudan was mentioned earlier and I hope to mention it later because it is a key focus of the region's problems. As has been mentioned, there is a lack of food and medical supplies there and the camps are becoming permanent because of the problems. DFID has done a lot of work there and ought to have due credit for it, but there is always much more to be done. When arguing for more direct overseas development aid, wherever it goes, we must press for it to be spent effectively. When we hear stories of birthday celebrations that cost more than the aid to the region, we know that there is a real problem. I genuinely have no problem explaining to my constituents, even in the poorest parts of the constituency, why more money should be spent on increasing our aid expenditure, but they want to see it spent effectively.

Daniel Kawczynski: On that point, when I visited Kenya recently with the International Development Committee I read all the national newspapers, and I found that the debate there during that time focused on what types of Russian helicopter and plane should be bought for the Ministers, at a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds. That was in the national papers every day. I was so disappointed that while we are giving them £50 million in aid, they are spending hundreds of millions on luxury helicopters for themselves.

John Barrett: I must not be distracted because there are too many other issues I would like to squeeze in during the remaining time, but I will say that problems have arisen before in Kenya, as they have with the military hardware that India purchases and the air traffic control system in Tanzania.

I would like to focus on the fact, which was mentioned earlier, that UK bilateral aid expenditure to north Africa fell from £3.5 million in 2003-04 to £0.5 million in 2005-06 and then to zero in 2007-08. We cannot, however, ignore the amount of money that we, as major contributors to the European Union, spend that works its way to our near neighbours. That is an important reason why we must be aware of what is happening in countries that are effectively our near neighbours. Many people go from the UK to Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt on holiday, as it is a short flight away, but we also see on television that there are problems there with terrorism and migration, and they are right on our doorstep.

The challenges in north Africa are certainly different from those in sub-Saharan or west Africa, and while the need to reduce poverty in the whole region is perhaps not so pressing because it has oil wealth and other riches, there are nevertheless continuing economic and political problems in north Africa that ought to be of key concern to the UK. Mali, for example, is one of the world's poorest nations, so it is natural to ask why it receives no aid.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing north Africa, from a security and development perspective, is the growing spectre of al-Qaeda in the region. Since the foundation of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat and its official siding with al-Qaeda, the threat of fundamentalism in Algeria and across north Africa has grown. Members will recall that in 2008 militants from al-Qaeda abducted the UN special envoy, Robert Fowler, and his assistant, Louis Guay, near Algiers. Their release in April 2009 was welcomed across the world. Meanwhile, security forces in Morocco have clamped down on several militant cells, arresting, trying and jailing their leaders. Having blamed four incidents in 2007 on al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda-inspired groups, security forces are said to be on the lookout for militants who are believed to be crossing into Morocco from Algeria. There were also the Madrid train bombings in 2004, which killed almost 200 people, as it was accepted that they were the work of a Moroccan gang.

Now that a significant number of al-Qaeda fighters are leaving Iraq after the latest military offensive, north Africa appears to have attracted the largest number of returnees. According to reports confirmed by officials and analysts, there is a new arc of potential terror in the region, across Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. For anyone who believes in the war on terror, the next bout could well be fought and based in north Africa, but I question the entire concept of a war on terror, which developed in the Blair/Bush era. We cannot frame our commitment to development and aid in the region without being aware of that growing threat.

Anyone who is in any doubt about the pressing need for our aid policies to react to those shifting realities need only look to Morocco, where Islamists cleverly exploit gaps in Government services to their own advantage. While preparing for armed action and terrorism, they have created a range of charities offering the services that the Government fail to provide, such as interest-free loans, medical care, scholarships, support for newlyweds and subsidised travel to Mecca. All are handled under the umbrella of the Justice and Benevolent Foundation, an old branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. If we cannot help those Governments to provide the essential goods and services their people demand, the ground will be fertile for potential extremists to fill the vacuum and reap political influence and legitimacy.

Conversely, by sharpening our aid-giving we can directly and drastically reduce the attractiveness of militant groups to local populations. While it is right that we base aid on humanitarian need, we must nevertheless accept that the danger of Governments collapsing in countries such as Mali, where there is a growing fear of al-Qaeda influence, would fatally undermine development goals across the entire region. Aid to north African nations must focus at least in part on securing strong and capable states that can provide for the people and thus reduce the attractiveness of al-Qaeda and fundamentalist doctrines. That regional approach to aid ought to be a key feature of our aid policy, that of the European Community and other multilateral programmes to which we are donors.

As Members have mentioned, there is a huge problem with refugees moving from western and sub-Saharan Africa to north Africa, and often then to Europe. Can the Minister confirm whether we have considered what further use we could make of the European neighbourhood policy? EU-north African relations are a good test of the ENP's capacity to improve the EU's relations with the region, and Morocco in particular, with which we have managed to construct a solid relationship, has been portrayed as a good partner with the EU. Does he believe that the ENP gives us the chance to develop those relationships with the entire region, and if so,

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what are we doing through the EU to lead action on that? I know that the European Mediterranean policy, a close cousin of the ENP, has faced criticism over its approach. I am sure that I am not alone in wanting to know what lessons can be learnt.

In addition to the problems with al-Qaeda, the whole of north Africa suffers from the problems of climate change, but unfortunately I do not have time to discuss those today. I will briefly raise the problem of arms exports from the UK. I believe that too many arms exports have reached north Africa and caused problems in the region. Time has beaten me, so I shall conclude there.

3.39 pm

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bayley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this timely and important debate. He spoke with great passion and knowledge and certainly gave me, and, I am sure, the Minister, enormous food for thought.

One of my hon. Friend's key points was to highlight the different approaches the Department for International Development takes to low-income and middle-income countries. Indeed, I saw that at first hand when I travelled to Guatemala last year. It is a bizarre country. The first thing one sees after leaving the airport is a Porsche garage, and within half an hour's distance from the city one is up in the hills with people living on less than $1 a day. As the Chairman of the International Development Committee, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), said, we should perhaps look again at how we treat middle-income countries.

My hon. Friend commented on the branding of UK aid. That may be attractive to some, but, on the basis of personal experience, having served as a development officer in Helmand in Afghanistan for a time, I would urge a degree of caution. The last thing we wanted to do there, as we were trying to build a sense of loyalty to a central Afghan Government, was to brand everything with a UK flag. That would have been counter-productive, but there is no one-size-fits-all approach. We must look at each case individually.

My hon. Friend also spoke briefly about Sudan. We have concerns about how DFID support is being delivered there, and we need to look at that again to ensure that it is done effectively.

The hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) also made an interesting and informed speech. He cautioned against this debate crossing between the Foreign Office and DFID. For my own part, I intend to stick firmly with the DFID side of the debate, and I am sure that he will forgive me for that.

DFID's website clearly states that its core role is

"to make sure every pound of British aid works its hardest to help the world's poor."

It goes on to say that the Department's first target is to

"reach the millennium development goals...by 2015."

Conservative Members may have some concerns as to how effective the Department is in achieving those aims, but, none the less, they are aims that we support. For example, we agree that reaching the millennium development goals by 2015 should be a core priority for any British Government, which is why the Conservative party is committed to achieving the UN target of 0.7 per cent. of gross national income spent on aid by 2013. It is also by following the core aims that we can help to define the UK's approach to aid to north Africa.

From the latest figures that I have—they are slightly confusing—the UK allocated close to £2.8 million of bilateral aid to north Africa in 2007-08. That is a marked reduction from the £19.68 million in 2006-07 and considerably lower than the one-time high of £42.9 million in 2004-05. Indeed, the last time the Department itself gave bilateral aid was in 2006, when £519,000 was given. As my hon. Friend said, that has since reduced to zero. Does the Minister think that such levels of aid will continue?

To be reasonable, it would be superficially easy to criticise the considerable reduction in aid to north Africa, but the move is consistent with the stated aims of the Department: that UK aid should be spent where each pound will have the greatest impact on poverty, thus levering the greatest influence on helping to reach the millennium development goals. But what aid should we give to north Africa? It still faces its fair share of challenges in respect of democracy, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Islington, North, a lack of press freedom, especially in Libya, and poor maternal mortality, to name but a few.

However, it is important to note that none of the countries in the north African region—Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia—are on the United Nations list of the least developed nations. The gross domestic product figures for Egypt and Algeria are $162 million and $159 million respectively—more than New Zealand—and GDP figures for Libya and Algeria are higher than those for Croatia or Luxembourg. Those facts are underlined by the UN MDG monitor, which is an initiative that tracks each country's progress towards the millennium development goals. It records good to mediocre progress in the region. Indeed, four countries have made particular progress in delivering the millennium development goals.

Algeria is on track to meet the goals, and is poised to achieve both social and economic progress. If we take employment rates, for example, we can see that unemployment in Algeria has dropped from 27 per cent. in 2001 to 12.7 per cent. in 2008, and maternal mortality has declined from 117 per 1,000 births in 1999 to 96 per 1,000 in 2005.

Egypt has partially tackled its hunger and under-nourishment problems. Only 5 per cent. of Egypt's children are now chronically underweight. That figure is still too high, but it is a vast improvement on a decade ago. More impressively, 95 to 97 per cent. of children of both sexes are enrolled in primary school education. Egypt is well on track to meet five of the eight millennium development goals.

The UN development programme's 2005 report declares that all Libya's millennium development goals are on target to be met within the appropriate time frame. Under-five mortality rates have dropped significantly from 160 per 1,000 in 1971 to 30 per 1,000 in 2001, and 90 per cent. of children of both sexes are enrolled in primary education.

Tunisia has made considerable progress in achieving the millennium development goals and is set to meet the majority of the targets by 2015. That impressive development has been spurred on by Tunisia having almost 100 per cent. of children of both sexes enrolled in primary education. Unfortunately, Morocco, while superficially booming from sun, sea and sand tourism, is struggling to keep pace with its north African neighbours. The MDG monitor suggests that a fully literate work force will not be achieved until 2040.

Further progress is required, but it is clear that north Africa as a region is making progress towards achieving the millennium development goals, especially when compared with other parts of the African continent. It is therefore our belief that the UK can spend its aid budget more effectively by focusing on the least developed countries which, on the African continent, would primarily be in sub-Saharan Africa rather than the middle-income countries in north Africa.

However, as with everything, there is a question of balance. It is not that we believe that north Africa should not receive any aid. UK bilateral aid has decreased significantly, but UK taxpayers' money continues to be spent via multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the European Union. I would like to take a moment to look at some of the ways that that money is being spent.

There are several successful UN and World Bank projects in north Africa, which help to foster both social and economic development. For instance, the World Bank's poor peri-urban neighbourhood water provision scheme will have provided 11,300 homes in Morocco with basic water and sanitation by 2010.

Likewise, the African Development Bank is also working hard. It has its headquarters in the region, in Tunis. When I spent a week there last year on an internship with the ADB, I visited several projects in Tunisia indirectly funded by British taxpayers via that bank. Of particular interest was a development just outside the capital: a major road project on the coast, which is aimed at increasing tourism. It is an impressive project, but it speaks volumes that Tunisia is sufficiently advanced in its development programme that it can focus on tourism projects rather than the provision of basic amenities for its population.

There is a similar picture elsewhere in the region with ADB projects. Egypt has received support for power projects, and the principal work of the bank in Morocco is in strengthening the Government. Libya and Algeria have had no requirement to borrow from the bank at all.

Putting our contributions to multilateral institutions to one side, there are other ways that we can help north Africa to develop and not only meet, but surpass the millennium development goals and become a viable trading partner of the UK. Notwithstanding our concerns at the effectiveness of the delivery of aid via the EC—that is a debate in itself—we could, for example, look at helping the EC strengthen and build on its European neighbourhood partnership initiatives, which would help to boost economic growth in the region.

The ENP instrument was developed in 2004 to promote prosperity, stability and security in the EU's new neighbours after its enlargement. The ENP offers a privileged relationship to neighbours who share the EU's common values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, good governance, market economy principles and sustainable development. The ENP rightly does not pre-empt the accession of countries and is not an alternative. It simply sets out to strengthen the economic and social interaction between the EU and its neighbours.

Currently, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia are members of the ENP, and Libya's future inclusion is under negotiation. The EU and each of the countries have drawn up an ENP action plan to be carried out between 2007 and 2010 or 2013, depending on the country. Perhaps it would be appropriate to spend a few moments looking at how the action plans will help north Africa to continue to develop and meet its millennium development goals—on the other hand, perhaps not, as we are running out of time.

The ENP supplies not only binding treaties that have development at their heart, but a means by which to monitor progress in meeting the targets. What is more, treaties have not been forced on nations but are drawn from the priorities of the host nations—in this case, north African states—and the EU to strengthen the interaction between neighbouring regions. That said, given our major contribution to the EC and the fact that it is the key player in the region, I would ask the Minister what steps his Department is taking to strengthen the delivery of aid via the EC.

Although it is a relative term, north Africa is better placed than other regions both in Africa and the rest of the world to meet the millennium development goals. UK bilateral aid to the region has declined, but the UK taxpayer continues to support the region through other multilateral institutions, in particular via the European Community. The Conservative party will continue to monitor the situation. However, I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this very timely and important debate.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Michael Foster): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bayley.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this particular debate. He may not know it, but I shared an office for four years with his predecessor as the MP for Shrewsbury and Atcham, Paul Marsden, so I can say to him that the voters in his constituency certainly elect colourful and interesting characters to be their Member of Parliament.

I obviously want to discuss some of the comments that have been made about the Government's support for the north African region. First, however, I want to express the Government's sympathies to the family of Edwin Dyer, who was so barbarically murdered by terrorists in Mali. As has been said at Prime Minister's Question Time, our thoughts are with his family.

The debate began with the hon. Gentleman saying that he felt that someone had to be "some sort of nutter, fanatic or extremist" to question the work of the Department for International Development. I would never, ever refer to him in that way. Indeed, I welcome well-informed and evidence-based challenges to the work that DFID does, because I do not believe that we can

[Mr. Michael Foster]

stay the best development agency in the world by resting on our laurels. I welcome challenges and prompting along those lines.

I also want to point out what were perhaps contradictions in the hon. Gentleman's arguments about the assistance given to middle-income countries as compared with low-income countries. He said that a third of the poorest people in the world were living in middle-income countries and more should be done to help them. At the same time, he argued very strongly that UK aid to China should cease and he also argued that India should go it alone. I would hazard a guess that that third of the poorest people in the world are living in China and India. I urge caution about the nature of the argument that he makes, if he is so passionate about helping those people.

Our policy towards middle-income countries was raised by the International Development Committee, as the right hon. Member for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce), who is the Chairman of that Committee, mentioned. I would just add that, with the White Paper that is being discussed, there is an opportunity for individual MPs, and even the Committee as a whole, to contribute towards developing that White Paper, including making a contribution on our policy on middle-income countries.

I also feel strongly about branding. There is a case to make for better branding of the things for which the United Kingdom taxpayers pay. Indeed, I sent the hon. Gentleman, along with all colleagues in the House, an e-mail that showcased our work on Gaza. In that e-mail, he will see a picture of four Toyota Land Cruisers being supplied by the UK with a DFID logo and a big Union Jack on the side, to show that the UK taxpayer was making a contribution and effort in Gaza. However, that is not something that can be applied in each and every circumstance where aid is given, as the hon. Member for North-East Milton Keynes (Mr. Lancaster) suggested.

DFID tries to provide 90 per cent. of our funding to low-income countries, to enable us to hit the millennium development targets. That means that the bulk of our funding goes to Africa, Asia and parts of the middle east. The fact that the north African countries are typically middle-income countries means that they do not receive a large proportion of our bilateral aid.

However, as the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, a significant number of people in north Africa are living in poverty and facing major challenges, such as insecurity, conflict, breaches of their human rights, gender inequality, rapid population growth, unemployment and economic stagnation. Many Governments in the region are either reluctant or unable to take forward the economic, political, security and social reforms that are needed to tackle poverty and to pursue policies that promote peaceful regional co-operation. Therefore, DFID has adopted five strands in our particular approach to supporting north Africa, working in partnership with, or through, other organisations in the region.

First, DFID and the Foreign Office are helping to shape the EU's European neighbourhood policy and the allocation of its aid budget, the European neighbourhood and partnership instrument. The ENPI covers 16 countries, including those south of the EU, such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The ENP aims to secure mutual prosperity and stability, along with deeper political and economic integration between the EU and its neighbours.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that he was not really interested in what the EU was doing; he described EU aid as being "little" pots of money. I just want to put on the record the fact that as part of the UK's overall contribution to the European Commission—a contribution of around 17 per cent. of the European Commission's budget—the UK's contribution to the ENPI is about £120 million a year, which is not a little or inconsiderable sum of money. Furthermore, in terms of the annual average allocation to countries in north Africa, Libya received €2 million, Algeria €55 million, Egypt €139.5 million, Morocco €163.5 million and Tunisia €75 million. Those figures are the annual average allocation to those countries for the period from 2007 to 2010.

We have worked in partnership with the Foreign Office to influence and implement the design of the programmes funded by the ENP, to ensure that the aid is delivered effectively and properly monitored. We also work to ensure that the programmes of the European Community, the EU member states generally and the European Investment Bank are joined-up and prioritise poverty reduction and economic development.

The second strand of our approach is delivered through DFID's middle east and north Africa regional programme, whereby we support the work to tackle key barriers to development by stimulating economic growth and improving security right across north Africa. Our main intervention for the promotion of growth in the region has been through support to the International Finance Corporation's private enterprise partnership for the middle east and north Africa, or PEP-MENA. That is a multi-donor trust fund that supports new investment and job creation and develops new income opportunities in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia among others.

The fund provides advice to companies and helps to improve their access to finance, making it easier for people to set up new businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises. It also helps Governments to develop public-private partnership projects and to introduce environmentally and socially sustainable business practices.

Jeremy Corbyn: What advice is given to private sector companies on trading with Morocco where the goods bought or traded with are produced in Western Sahara?

Mr. Foster: I made a note about the EU's relationship with Morocco and the trade between the two when my hon. Friend spoke. He will be receiving a letter from me explaining exactly the details of our policy on that particular trading issue.

The third strand of our approach to north Africa relates to security. As well as working with other Departments—the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence—we have targeted funding at think tanks, such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Middle East Centre, to produce evidence-based analysis on political and economic reform issues, which will encourage open and progressive debate. We also provide support to Transparency International to set up advocacy and legal advice centres in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and the occupied Palestinian territories. Those centres

help to build up the capacity of civil society to engage citizens directly in the fight against corruption.

The fourth strand of our approach involves working with regional development partners who have significant influence on stability and economic development in the region. For example, I recently signed a partnership agreement with the Islamic Development Bank and we will be contributing to its statistical capacity-building initiative in the middle east and north Africa. That programme will improve the quality of statistics to increase accountability and give Governments the data that they need to help them to make better evidence-based policy.

Finally, the fifth strand of our approach is that we believe that securing good development outcomes in north Africa requires explicit engagement with the political process. Politics can make a difference between violence and the path to prosperity. It means giving the poor and marginalised a greater voice and greater opportunities in life. For example, time and again the evidence demonstrates that maternal health care is more likely to be improved where women themselves have a greater say in the policy formulation.

We will continue to work with the Foreign Office and through the EU and other partners to do more to support lasting political settlements, to build institutions to resolve conflict and to give a voice to the poor and the vulnerable. We will encourage states to provide basic security, justice and the rule of law, creating the stability that countries need to get on the path to economic growth.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham mentioned UK support to Sudan. I just want to put on the record the fact that the UK is the largest European bilateral humanitarian donor to Sudan. We gave more than £55 million in humanitarian assistance to it in 2008-09. Furthermore, the UK provides 50 per cent. of the common humanitarian fund for Sudan and we have just given £36 million for 2009. That makes up the UK's largest single humanitarian contribution in the world, and those figures would have been available on the DFID website.

The debate has raised some important issues, which I hope I have been able to address. The Government will continue to support north Africa as part of our wider approach to poverty reduction, working with our EU partners, multilateral organisations, non-governmental organisations and other Governments to make progress towards meeting the millennium development goals in all regions of the world.

Private Parking Companies

4 pm

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): It is a delight to be under your chairmanship, Mr. Bayley; I have not had that privilege before. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue that I am sure many hon. Members have come across in their constituencies: the regulation of parking on private land—predominantly land owned by businesses—and the enforcement of rules by privately run and contracted parking companies.

Let me say first that I do not advocate a state of affairs in which business owners are unable to maintain propriety over the parking spaces that they provide for their customers. I also recognise the work of the British Parking Association and many of its members to raise standards and improve practices in the private parking industry. It must be made clear, however, that the behaviour and attitudes of a significant minority of private parking firms are at best questionable; at worst, they are rude, aggressive, manipulative and potentially threatening.

I have called for this debate to raise the concerns of my constituents, to expose the opacity of the legal landscape in which the firms operate and to see whether my hon. Friend the Minister will give me some comfort in thinking that we can move some way towards finding a solution. Although the experience of my constituents does not relate specifically to wheel-clamping, many of the arguments that I shall make are relevant to the companies that impose wheel-clamping sanctions as well.

First, I shall highlight some of the experiences of my constituents in recent months, which initially brought the problem to my attention. In Stirling we recently had an example of what I can only suggest is questionable practice on the part of one particular private parking firm, even though it is apparently operating within the voluntary guidelines. It was able to access the details of the drivers—my constituents—through the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, as it is a member of the BPA. My constituents have been subject to fines for wheels being inches "outwith the parking bay". In fairness, the company has disputed that. Constituents have told of parking attendants waiting in their own vehicles, apparently ready to pounce as soon as someone leaves their car unattended. Again, in fairness, I have to say that the company denies that. My constituents have suffered at the hands of parking attendants who have not been clearly identifiable by their uniforms, contrary to the claims of the company involved, or who have failed properly to identify themselves when asked. Many elderly and infirm constituents have reported parking attendants being confrontational, rude and intimidating.

Many of those ticketed live on extremely limited means. The parking area to which I am referring covers an area where there are cut-price shops, which are attractive to people watching their budgets. Failure to pay the so-called reduced parking charge of £60 within the tight time scale of 14 days results in an increase in the fine to £85, which increases to £135 to cover "administrative costs"—I am quoting from the letters received by my constituents—if it is not paid within a further 14 days. I ask the Minister to compare that with the local police authority fine of £30, with 21 days to pay, and an option, if the owner challenges the fine, to request a court hearing.

[Mrs. Anne McGuire]

It is not reasonable to expect my constituents who found themselves in that situation to be able to find £60 or £85 in the time scale given. If there was a breach of the deadline, they received even more threatening demands—letters that implied that non-payment could affect their credit rating or lead them to lose part of their wages. One constituent reported that she was receiving calls up to twice a day from what she believed was a debt collection company, demanding payment on behalf of the car parking firm for a fine that she claimed she had already paid. The tone of the calls was described to me as rude, patronising and threatening. The company could not explain what the £65 it was demanding was for, and in the end the woman was so fed up and distressed that she paid it by direct debit over the phone. She believes that she has now paid £135 in total.

Signage in the car park met the minimum BPA guidelines but, in my opinion and that of my constituents, it was improperly placed and therefore difficult to see. Only this week, a constituent sent me a photograph of a parking sign upside down at the bottom of a wall. I do not know how people are expected to see such signage. As the parking area had previously been free and was supposed to be free for people shopping in the area, the signage should have been sufficient to indicate that that was no longer the case.

The company will tell us that there is an appeals system, but it is flawed. First, it is conducted by the company whose operatives have handed out the fines in the first place, so it is someone's word against theirs. A number of my constituents report submitting an appeal, receiving no acknowledgement and then receiving an automatically generated final demand for payment. Eventually, many of the fines were written off at appeal, but that was after a lengthy, stressful and very public process that caused great distress to my constituents. There is no margin for understanding and no middle ground. The attitude is far from constructive. I am only astonished that the business owners in the area did not see that the attitude was counter-productive and that it was detrimental to their businesses if customers were frightened of parking outside their shops.

I want to reflect on how this situation could have come about and to dwell for a few moments on the legal landscape. We have seen regulations passed to govern parking enforcement on highways and other local authority land with the Traffic Management Act 2004, along with similar legislation in the devolved regions and nations. There have also been welcome attempts by the Home Office to regulate the wheel-clamping industry with the Private Security Industry Act 2001 and its corollaries. However, the issues that I am raising go far beyond wheel-clamping, which, as the Minister will no doubt tell me, is not legal in Scotland.

With parking on private land, however, the situation is somewhat different. Currently, private parking is not governed by any specific legislation. In England it falls under the laws of contract and trespass; in Scotland it is purely contract law. In Scotland, by parking on private land, a member of the public is in effect entering into a contract with the owner. If they contravene the rules set out by the owner, such as in respect of parking bays, by exceeding the time allowed or in respect of patronage conditions and so on, they are in breach of contract. It is a mysterious contract to many, I have no doubt. It may be covered by contract law in Scotland, but then perhaps it is covered by contract law that covers aspects of life on a Great Britain basis.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Is it not also the case that car owners who intend to pay but need to go to a nearby shop to get change to do so are given no period of grace in which to do that?

Mrs. McGuire: I have not had time to go into all the examples, but what the hon. Gentleman describes certainly illustrates some of the experiences of my constituents in that there was no period of grace at all. I refer him back to my comments about operatives waiting in vans, giving the impression that they were ready to pounce as soon as someone came out of their car. I want to be clear that the penalty notice is not a fine. It looks and feels like a fine, people think it is a fine, but it is a notification of a breach of contract. Paying it is effectively an out-of-court settlement of a contract dispute, not a fine. However, none of that is much comfort to an elderly lady who receives an unpayable fine and a threatening demand letter. I shall return to the behaviour of some of those firms in a moment.

Any landowner—which could be anything from the local pub owner to the largest supermarket—can set restrictions for parking on their land. If they own the land on which they provide parking, they are free to enforce whatever rules they see fit. They are also free to employ somebody else to enforce those rules, which is where private parking companies come in. If a landlord enters into an agreement with one of those firms, the amount charged by the parking company, and who gets the revenue, is decided on an individual basis by the landowner and the parking contractor. Sometimes landowners will pay firms a flat fee, in which case the landowner will usually receive all or a share of the revenue from the tickets issued. In other cases, the landowner will pay the firm nothing on the understanding that it can keep all revenues from ticketing, however large.

There is no legal limit on the amounts that contractors can charge, and no oversight of how they enforce their charges. The parking industry's representative body, the British Parking Association, is aware of that, but I suspect that it is no more enthusiastic about poor practice among parking firms than I am. Although it has made no particular criticism of the company that I have used as an example, it recognises that the poor behaviour exhibited by some of its members reflects badly on the entire industry.

The BPA has established an approved operators scheme, which sets out approved practices that should remedy the above concerns. However, as I indicated, the firm that I mentioned was a member of the BPA and the approved operators scheme. Although the BPA does not investigate individual incidents, consistent breaches of the rules by member companies could lead to exclusion from the scheme and from BPA membership.

The approved operators scheme is voluntary, and because the BPA is a membership organisation, its sanctioning powers are limited. No companies have been excluded from the BPA as a result of reported abuses. That reflects the BPA's desire to keep member

companies on board and retain some form of incentive for companies to comply with the scheme. Part of the way such companies work is by utilising the right of anybody to request keeper information for a vehicle from the DVLA. That can be done by post or—most likely in the case of a parking company that handles large amounts of requests—electronically.

The DVLA recently restricted electronic access to its vehicle keeper register to members of an approved trade association, which in effect means the BPA. That provides a stick—albeit a very small one—to add to the BPA's carrots. However, I suggest that it exposes a potential conflict of interest for the BPA. As the registered trade association, it would be incredibly difficult for the BPA to act as both regulator and representative of the industry. In addition to creating a conflict of interest, it simply does not have the capacity to be all things to all parking firms.

I am delighted to see the Minister here today. However, I must be frank and say that I had some initial trouble in finding a Department to take this issue on. Eventually, I was able to confirm which Department had that responsibility, and that allowed me to submit a written question on 20 March 2009, column 1390W. I asked whether the Secretary of State would bring forward plans to regulate parking on private land, and I was told that the Department had no plans to do so.

It is not surprising that there is some confusion as to who in Government holds responsibility for this area. I would be happy to be proven wrong, but by my reckoning, we have the following range of responsibilities: the Home Office regulates clamping through the Security Industry Authority; the Department for Transport regulates on-street parking through the 2004 Act; the Department for Communities and Local Government is responsible for local authorities, which administer parking within their remit under the law that I have just mentioned; and the Ministry of Justice is responsible for contract law across England, which as I have said forms the legal basis for parking restrictions and charges on private land. I have not even mentioned the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform as having a role in this as well.

In Scotland, some of those matters will be the responsibility of the Scottish Government and a host of other agencies and Departments. We also have the BPA, which covers private parking firms that operate across the whole country and provides access to DVLA records as a GB-wide organisation. To tackle that problem, I suggest that we need to address not only gaps in regulation of the parking industry but—with the greatest respect—gaps in Government responsibility.

I will move on quickly to a couple of comments that I want to make on future measures. We must create a framework that addresses three aspects of the private parking industry: regulation, adjudication and representation. For regulation, we need a legal framework in which companies can operate, and the means to judge how they have done so. That requires a means of setting and assessing compliance and common standards. The adjudication of individual cases of grievance requires some sort of recognised, transparent and trusted appeals process that is fair to landowners and those who have been ticketed. Representation is needed to allow a continued role for organisations such as the BPA, so that it can represent its members without a conflict of interest, set standards of best practice and lead the development of the industry.

We all recognise the importance of allowing business owners to control the use of their land to their best advantage. I recognise that some of the issues that I have raised will require discussion with devolved Administrations to seek a solution. I hope that we will have the chance to begin to expose some of the weaknesses in the system, identify what needs to be done and set in motion the work needed to do it. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Clark): It is nice to be with you again in the Chamber today, Mr. Bayley. At the outset, I want to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) on securing the debate. It is an issue of importance to many people.

There is a debate about where a motorist can leave his or her vehicle on land owned by an individual company or institution. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, those bodies are many and various. They can be schools, hospitals, large shops, complexes, or cinemas and other entertainment venues. The one thing common to all those places is that their land is not part of the public highway, and a member of the public has no automatic right to use it.

We all have the right to enjoy the use of our land as we see fit and—if it is large enough—to restrict access to it. Landowners are entitled to prevent unwanted parking, which includes the use by others of any parking facilities provided for visitors and customers. Therefore, they also have the right to charge for the use of their land and to put in place such charging schemes as the law allows.

On the other side, drivers have a responsibility to check when they park their vehicle that they are allowed to do so. They must undertake that requirement, but we should expect fairness and civilised behaviour from those whose business it is to enforce the rights of landowners—an issue highlighted by my right hon. Friend. Of course, that does not mean that a motorist who parks on private land is not protected by the law. A motorist may complain to the local trading standards office if a landowner does not provide in good time material information about the service that is provided. Motorists can complain to the Office of Fair Trading if contract terms are considered unfair. It should be noted that unfair contract terms are not binding on the consumer.

Motorists are at risk, however, if they trespass on land. Many of us will have used such areas ourselves—for example, when visiting a pub or restaurant—and will know that the land can be used only by the customers of that establishment. It is therefore unacceptable for people to leave vehicles there if they are not customers. Land can also be set aside for resident-only parking; again, not everybody can leave their vehicles there.

Landowners use one of three main ways to keep watch over who is using their land. One is to have barriers at the entrance and/or exit, which can often be seen in private car parks. The second is immobilisation and/or removal of the offending vehicle. The third is ticketing. The barrier is, perhaps, the most acceptable

[Paul Clark]

method, but it is not always practical for small areas such as shop or petrol station forecourts. Nor is it suitable if it is likely to cause disruption to traffic on the main highway—for example, if people are queuing on the road to get in through the barrier. Nevertheless, barriers have a role to play.

My right hon. Friend mentioned immobilisation, but it was not the key thrust of her speech. None the less, I can tell her that on 30 April the Government launched a consultation on the regulation of vehicle immobilisation businesses. We wish to curb practices such as unreasonably high release fees and inadequate signage, another important subject in today's debate. To tackle unacceptable practices, the consultation seeks views on the Government's preferred option of introducing a compulsory membership scheme for vehicle immobilisation businesses. You will not expect me, Mr. Bayley, to prejudge the outcome of that genuine consultation, but the Government are likely to introduce industry-wide standards for the size and visibility of signage, maximum penalties and control of payment methods.

That brings us to the third way of watching over those who park on private land—that of ticketing, the sending to the vehicle keeper of a request for payment or an excess charge for leaving the vehicle on the said piece of land. Developments in technology and the requirement for vehicle immobilisation operatives to be licensed have resulted in a number of landowners changing their enforcement methods from immobilisation to ticketing.

The Government's view is that the disclosure of keeper data is fair and reasonable if there is a breach of civil or contract law—a factor highlighted by my right hon. Friend. Tracing people who do not comply with the conditions for parking on private land is regarded in most circumstances as reasonable. To ensure that the data are used responsibly, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency introduced in 2007 a requirement that data could be obtained electronically only by companies that were members of an ATA—an approved trade association.

The only trade association accredited for the private parking sector is the British Parking Association. To obtain and keep membership of the BPA, a company must abide by a strict code of practice. The provisions of the code include the requirement for appropriate signs to be provided, which means that the contract for using that land would in most circumstances fall within the Government's consumer protection legislation. Not only is there a need for signage, but to comply with BPA membership a company must have a contract with the landowner, use trained staff and operate dispute resolution procedures. Indeed, BPA companies are encouraged to use liveried vehicles and to use the BPA's charge structure.

I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend's comments about the experience of some of her constituents. I understand that the company concerned is a member of the BPA. What she said about the trouble and difficulties that her constituents have had with this company causes me concern. I have no doubt that the BPA will be aware of today's debate, and the concerns raised here will do it no good. It must be well aware that one of its member companies is falling short of the association's requirements. I will return to that issue.

I wish to clarify a couple of points raised by my right hon. Friend. I understand that the BPA investigates individual incidents if it believes that there has been a breach of the code of practice or if the DVLA receives a complaint about a company that it would like the BPA to investigate further. The BPA will work with such companies, usually to ensure that they understand the requirements and the standards that are to be met. I have known that happen in other examples, and there has been substantial improvement.

The Competition Commission is not concerned that the BPA cannot fulfil two functions at the same time, although my right hon. Friend said that it would be a conflict of interests, but it would be concerned if the BPA was the only organisation that the DVLA would consider for accreditation, as it would effectively hand the BPA a monopoly. That, however, is not the case. The BPA is the only organisation that has applied for and gained accreditation in the parking sector. The DVLA is happy to consider applications from other organisations for accreditation.

Under current arrangements, data can be obtained electronically only by recognised members, although they can be obtained manually by non-ATA members. However, we recognise that the provisions should be tightened, and in April we consulted on extending the requirement for membership of an ATA to all parking enforcement companies, whether data are obtained electronically or manually.

I am conscious of the time, and I want to cover most of the main points raised today. Legislation is already in being. For instance, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 ensures that we receive service free of harassment. I recall the case raised by my right hon. Friend of the lady who had received a threatening telephone call. Under the Administration of Justice Act 1970, it is an offence to claim payment of a contractual debt in ways that cause alarm, distress or humiliation. We also have consumer protection legislation.

Given the points raised this afternoon, I believe that we need to continue our work across various Departments. There is no question about that. However, the BPA will be well aware of the cases raised by my right hon. Friend. We need to ensure that the strict codes of the BPA, which are normally followed through properly, are enforced in this case.

Back Pain Treatment (Costs)

4.30 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bayley, during today's final debate. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place; no doubt he has come hotfoot from his Department. As he well knows—I arranged a little pre-briefing for him—I shall address the issue of low back pain costs and the relationship to complementary and alternative medicine and integrated health care, and I shall refer specifically to the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence's new guidelines, in which his Department no doubt had a hand.

I should like to provide some background. In 1914 the General Medical Council issued a warning notice to qualified doctors, directing that there should be no associating with unqualified persons or collusion with therapists using alternative therapies without the appropriate qualifications and registration with the GMC. We have moved on light years since then, and there have been three defining moments in the pursuit of the integration of complementary and alternative medicine in the health service. I say that with 20 years' experience in the House, during which time, as the Minister knows, I have led debates on this subject on many occasions.

The first milestone came in the 1990s when the then Member for Loughborough, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), while Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health, introduced guidelines stating that doctors could contract with complementary and alternative medical practitioners provided that they took clinical responsibility. That was the first time that the health service moved towards the provision of care with complementary and alternative practitioners. Running almost in parallel came the Osteopaths Act 1993 and Chiropractors Act 1994, which were introduced as private Members' Bills. I had the honour to serve on both Committees. For the first time osteopathy and chiropractic were regulated by Acts of Parliament and started to develop their own registers, which were later recognised.

The second milestone was a House of Lords report in 2000 that, for the first time, officially categorised the different types of therapy into broad classifications, making it easier for legislators, the Department and Members of Parliament to think about complementary and alternative medicine. This debate focuses on disciplines in the first category—osteopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture, which are referred to in the new NICE guidelines. Some of the recommendations in the Lords report have been implemented, but others have not. In the nine years since, there has not been the growth in access to complementary therapies through the NHS that we might have expected, despite the enormous public demand for such services. There is a bit of a lag there.

The third milestone is the recent publication of NICE's guidelines on low back pain. Finally, NICE has issued guidelines to physicians suggesting that complementary therapies, whether osteopathy, chiropractic or acupuncture, can be employed for a given period and that patients can use any of them. This is a tremendous breakthrough because, as I understand it, the guidelines are backed by carefully controlled studies that have given the Department the confidence to do this. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that. The guidelines open up wonderful opportunities for the further development and roll-out of complementary services in the health service.

In low back pain the Minister has found a wonderful target, given the massive amount of time taken off work because of it. It is a very big problem—not only is the Minister nodding, but so are you, Mr. Bayley. I could hardly receive a greater vote of confidence without going through the Division Lobby. But anyway, about 20 per cent. of people with low back pain—one in 15 of the population—will consult their GP about it. As an exercise programme, NICE has recommended a course of manual therapy, which includes osteopathy or chiropractic, or a course of acupuncture, and GPs can offer a range of options if necessary.

What are the problems? The first, which I hope that the Minister will talk about, is roll-out. How will people access these services across the country? Until very recently, most were provided privately. There is a postcode lottery. It is estimated that only 10 per cent. of primary care trusts refer any patients for osteopathic treatment, despite more than 7 million osteopathic treatments being carried out in the UK each year. What is the cost to the economy? In 2006, 175 million working days were lost, at a cost of between £103 billion and £129 billion. We are talking about astronomical sums of money. According to the Department for Work and Pensions' figures, a combination of stress and musculoskeletal disorders accounts for up to 75 per cent. of work-related sickness. The Government could hardly have chosen a better target for this new policy.

Much action is needed, however. Studies have indicated the existence of a turning point: after four to six weeks the likelihood of an employee with low back pain returning to work rapidly falls. We need to be very aware of that window. Although the new NICE guidelines for persistent low back pain are welcome in increasing the options for patients and clinicians, I respectfully suggest to the Minister that we need to consider greater options during the stage prior to the sixth week.

I want to comment on the three main disciplines, and then address some other issues, such as the attacks made in the press, and the Health Bill, which no doubt the Minister is looking forward to considering—I think that Second Reading is on Monday. I have experienced all three treatments. Many years ago, I had a bad fall and broke some vertebrae in my back, and I am grateful to both osteopaths and chiropractors for putting me back together, rather like Humpty Dumpty—although hopefully sirenism is not an issue here. An American Senator said to me the other day that all health care basically relates to diet and exercise, and I am inclined to agree with regard to the origins of problems. But anyway, I must not digress, Mr. Bayley, because you might call me to order.

Osteopathy and manipulation, as distinct from physiotherapy, offer fantastic relief for people whose back matrix is out of order, and some very good studies have supported that conclusion. In 1999, the Royal College of General Practitioners concluded that osteopathic manipulation can provide pain reduction and an improvement in activity levels. The UK back pain exercise and manipulation—UK BEAM—trial, funded by the Medical Research Council, also came up with some positive results, as have other health service studies.

[David Tredinnick]

For example, the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust found that

"rapid access to an osteopath can prevent or reduce sickness absence and allow employees to benefit physically from early intervention".

Many of the press reports that have been positive about the NICE guidelines point out that the cost of bringing in such treatments will probably be, at the very least, no cost at all because of the savings made. The treatments may even have a positive outcome for health budgets at a time when we have an overburdened health service—we could make another speech on that and the Minister could reply. Anything that can reduce demand on conventional services and give surgeons more time to operate must be a good thing.

We have studies, such as the 1990 *British Medical Journal* study, that are very supportive of chiropractic. The Clinical Standards Advisory Group study in 1994 found that both chiropractic and osteopathy worked, and the Wiltshire study in 1999 also referred to the use of chiropractic. Although that is a good body of work, we need more research because then the Minister would feel confident in allowing other forms of treatment to be used. For example, cardiac, upper back, lower limb and circulatory problems could all be helped through chiropractic, osteopathy and acupuncture. A significant body of research supports the view that osteoporosis, post-operative pain, neck pain, headaches, nausea and vomiting can all benefit from acupuncture. I have used the treatment extensively to improve my own health. I believe that it has improved my eyesight, too, because I have had to reduce the strength of my glasses. I think that was due to the treatment of internal organs, which improved my ability to circulate energy. I have no scientific proof that that is the case, but I believe it to be so.

To help to pave the way forward, primary care commissioners need to be given effective advice. I have been asking for such advice in the Chamber for years. The time has come for NICE to give its blessing to osteopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture. Please get some advice out to health care commissioners about how to do that. We need a review of existing NICE guidance on complementary and alternative therapies. NICE has recently incorporated the National Electronic Library for Health into the newly launched NHS service. It will now be possible for NICE to review that guidance, which it has produced on a range of conditions, and to assess the potential to include CAM research bases there. There should be increased investment in CAM research, which could be modelled on that produced in the US or Australia. In Australia, there is the National Institute for Complementary Medicine, which might be a very good model for this country.

I was about to call you Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Bayley. We used to call you that in what was the Grand Committee Room. We served on the Committee of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill in that room for a year—long enough to walk to Madrid and back. Anyway, to return to the debate, I am concerned about some misleading attacks in the press by people who should know better. David Colquhoun, professor of pharmacology at University College hospital, states that despite all the evidence acupuncture is

"a rather theatrical placebo".

He goes on to define chiropractic as

"an invention of a 19th century salesman."

Such people are working in the Minister's hospitals. Can he not send out a warning shot to them, to say that now that these therapies are available on the health service, we want no more of this nonsense about science? I look forward to the Minister's reply.

4.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Phil Hope): Let me being by congratulating the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) on securing this debate about the cost to the NHS of treating back pain. He has quite clearly shown his depth of experience and interest in the subject, which he has gained from his personal experience and use of various therapies. Moreover, he does a huge amount of work in the House as the joint Chair of the all-party parliamentary group for integrated and complementary health care. I expected a fairly impassioned call for greater regard for complementary medicine, and I was not disappointed.

Anyone who has suffered from chronic back pain knows just what a debilitating condition it can be. In the worst case, it can devastate people's careers, their family life, their leisure time and their entire psychological well-being if it is not properly addressed. The chief medical officer made that point abundantly clear in his recent annual report, which found that people with chronic pain are seven times more likely to quit their jobs due to ill health, and that a quarter end up losing their job.

I was interested in the figures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Regrettably, back pain is on the rise. It is at least twice as common as it was 40 years ago. Some 7.8 million people in the UK have suffered moderate to severe pain lasting more than six months. More than 1.6 million people develop back pain lasting more than three months.

The hon. Gentleman was right to point out the considerable financial cost to the NHS. According to one report published in 2000, the cost to the NHS of treating back pain stood at around £1 billion a year in 1998. We can assume that that figure has increased. He used some other remarkable figures about the wider cost to the community. The study that I have just mentioned demonstrated the price that was paid by the wider community. It estimated that the total cost to society was somewhere between £6.6 billion and £12.3 billion, of which lost productivity accounted for at least £3.5 billion. Clearly, we have an issue that we need to address, and to continue to address in the way that we have in the past few years.

The hon. Gentleman was right to emphasise the importance of effective treatment for those who are unfortunate enough to suffer from this condition. I definitely share his pleasure at the final clinical guideline on lower back pain that was published by NICE last week. As he said, that guideline is based on the best available evidence, and it provides detailed advice for GPs and other clinicians on what treatments should be considered for patients presenting with lower back pain for more than six weeks. That is an important step forward. Like him, I hope that it is a spur to encourage the NHS to do even more to help those whose lives are blighted by chronic back pain.

I should like to put on the record my thanks to Professor Martin Underwood, the chair of the guideline development group, to Professor Paul Watson, the clinical adviser, and to other members of the group for their very thorough consideration and for the clarity of the resulting guideline.

The work by NICE builds on the work that we have already done to improve access to specialist pain services of all kinds. The hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying that, because of the amount that we have invested in the NHS, we have moved from a position in 1998 where the typical waiting time for access to specialist pain services was 16 weeks for non-urgent cases, a quarter of patients had to wait for more than 28 weeks and, in the worst cases, patients had to wait nearly three years to be seen. Thankfully, the situation is now much better. Waiting times for pain clinics, as for other specialist services, have been brought down to an absolute maximum of 18 weeks, and the average wait across all specialities is now four weeks for out-patient treatment, or nine weeks for treatment requiring an in-patient stay.

As part of that 18-week initiative, we are doing more to support local commissioners and clinicians in helping patients to manage chronic pain. For instance, we now have generic guidance to support the 18-week programme, and the Department of Health will be holding a series of regional seminars on chronic pain management, bringing together members of voluntary organisations, patients, commissioners and providers. All that should stand us in good stead in ensuring that the NICE guidelines on low back pain are properly implemented. I shall say more about that in a moment.

Let me turn to the role of complementary therapies, which was the central point of the hon. Gentleman's contribution. He is right to state that complementary treatments, such as acupuncture and spinal manipulation, are represented in the guidelines, alongside the use of painkillers, structured exercise programmes and patient education. The Government's position on back pain, as with all other conditions, is quite straightforward. We want to open up the fullest possible range of treatments to patients—but only if the evidence base is there to justify it. Our position on complementary therapies, as on any form of treatment that NICE considers, is that we keep an open mind. If the experts tell us that acupuncture or other forms of manipulative therapies, including chiropractic therapies, osteopathy or physiotherapy, can be effective, as they have done in this case, we are happy to see them added to the clinical armoury available on the NHS.

The hon. Gentleman was right to ask, "That's fine, but is it going to happen in practice? Is it going to be delivered on the ground? Can we ensure that what is written in a NICE guideline is what happens in practice when a patient with back pain goes to a GP?" The NHS has proved to be very responsive on the issue of back pain in tending to its own staff. Interestingly, in 2003, the National Audit Office estimated that an NHS trust with a budget of £100 million was likely to be paying out £1.25 million for staff who could not work because of back injuries. I am delighted to say that since that time, the NHS has achieved a 7 per cent. reduction in lost days from musculoskeletal problems, so within the NHS at least, there is a strong awareness of the issue and action is being taken.

On implementation, NICE has developed detailed guidance on costings and commissioning, which is available on its website. Obviously, it includes advice on the full range of treatments set out. However, guidelines are just that. Decisions on what treatments GPs suggest for patients remain with GPs. They need to take into account the safety of a treatment, its effectiveness and the availability of suitably qualified practitioners, but they are obviously best placed to know the individual circumstances of the patient. Likewise, the commissioning of local services must remain at the discretion of local PCTs, based on their understanding of the needs of their local community.

Maintaining autonomy for local practitioners to make local decisions is paramount for running an effective NHS, even though it means some variations in services. The hon. Gentleman used the term "postcode lottery". The Government believe—I hope he agrees with us—that the closer to the community and the patients we go, the better the decisions. It would be entirely inappropriate for a Minister to promote one treatment over others, however effective it is. Ultimately, decisions about the most appropriate treatment for a patient must be made by them and their GP.

A number of developments should help to ensure that the full range of NICE-approved treatments, including complementary treatments, gets a fair hearing with clinicians, commissioners and patients. First, last year's Next Stage Review clearly set out a future for the NHS in which primary care services are increasingly influenced by the patient's individual needs. The review clearly states that GPs and PCTs should have an innovative and entrepreneurial approach to developing new services for patients. We are beginning to see a culture change throughout the NHS that should encourage GPs and commissioners to be more creative, ambitious and flexible about the treatments they offer. That shift presents new opportunities for complementary and alternative therapies.

David Tredinnick: Will the Minister assure me that he will write, on the basis of this new development, a general instruction about the availability of the new service, so that there is no confusion?

Phil Hope: As I said earlier, such decisions are ultimately a matter for the GP and local commissioners, who look at the NICE guidelines. I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing what we can to draw attention to the new guideline, which was published only last week. That will make a big difference. Generally encouraging the NHS to be more entrepreneurial and responsive, and to offer a full range of treatments, will have a direct impact of the kind that we would both like.

Personal health budgets, which we are piloting at this stage, could be a powerful mechanism to broaden the range of available options. We are not being prescriptive about the areas for personal health budgets that should be piloted, but through some 40 pilots, we want to investigate the use of personal health budgets to provide services for people with long-term conditions, which could include people with chronic back pain. The provisional pilots are still developing their proposals and we will know more about their scope in due course.

[Phil Hope]

However, in time, personal health budgets could indeed be another mechanism to support the wider use of complementary medicine in back pain relief, if, of course, the patient wants to go down that route.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned research. The Department of Health commissions research to underpin policy and practice in health and health care through the National Institute for Health Research and the Department's policy research programme. Our research programme includes £3.4 million for a complementary and alternative medicine personal award scheme. That forms part of our research capacity development programme. The scheme supports 18 CAM researchers at the doctoral and post-doctoral level. They are developing a programme of research and nurturing the methodological skills of the more junior researchers in their teams. Their presence in the programme has allowed factors specific to CAM practice to be incorporated into approved research methodologies. That is an important step forward.

We are also funding complementary and alternative medicine evidence online, which is a collaboration between the Research Council for Complementary Medicine and the university of Westminster school of integrated health. That involves a detailed review and critical appraisal of the published research on specific complementary therapies, focusing on their use in NHS priority areas. The Department has also put money into research on the role of CAM in cancer patient care, and on the use of complementary medicine in primary care.

Finally, regulation is crucial when it comes to giving alternative techniques the credibility and respect that they need in the eyes of GPs and the general public. At present, there is no statutory regulation system in the UK governing the practice of complementary and alternative medicine, with the exception, as the hon. Gentleman said, of chiropractic therapy and osteopathy. As he said, he played an important role when, during his long service in the House, he sat on the Committees that brought the measures into being.

We will, however, soon be launching a public consultation on whether and how we should regulate practitioners of acupuncture, herbal medicine and traditional Chinese medicine. That comes from the recommendations of one of the working groups that were established in 2006 to implement proposals in the "Trust, Assurance and Safety" White Paper, so there is more work under way. Once the consultation is completed and when we have assessed the response, Ministers will make a decision on the way forward.

People with chronic back pain expect the NHS to do its utmost to help them to manage their condition. The new NICE guidelines will bring new clarity and choice to patients, in line with the Next Stage Review vision and the work we are doing to improve pain management in general. I expect clinicians and commissioners to pay equal attention to the full range of options that the new NICE guidelines advocate. The Government are playing their part to ensure that all scientifically proven treatments are considered on their merits, including complementary techniques.

The bottom line is quite simple: we want all patients to have access to the best possible treatments for them. I believe that the NICE guidelines are another important step towards achieving that for people suffering with the misfortune of chronic back pain. A debate such as this is another good opportunity to raise public awareness of the changes that are being made and of the enthusiasm of the hon. Gentleman and others for our work, and to ensure that patients, GPs and commissioners take the issue seriously and take it forward in the interests of the wider community.

Question put and agreed to.

4.59 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 4 June 2009

[MR. JOE BENTON *in the Chair*]

Road Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Ian Lucas.)*

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jim Fitzpatrick): I am grateful for the opportunity to open the debate. It is a pleasure to see you presiding over it, Mr. Benton. The subject of road safety has always attracted a good degree of cross-party consensus and I do not expect participants in this debate to divide on party political lines, even though this is an election day.

I begin by paying tribute to the hard work of the dedicated professionals in local and national Government, the emergency services and the private sector who have reduced the number of serious crashes and mitigated their consequences. They have done that by improving road design, enhancing vehicle safety and improving road-user behaviour. I also pay tribute to campaign organisations such as the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, led by Rob Gifford, and to bereaved families, who keep us focused on the key issues. However, although it is important to record our appreciation for the work that all those good people do, I do not want to dwell on past achievements. Today I want to talk about our long-term vision for road safety in Great Britain.

We all have an interest in reducing the number of casualties on Britain's roads and tackling the root causes of a menace that still accounts for nearly 3,000 deaths a year throughout the country. That figure has been coming down steadily in recent years. Indeed, the total number of deaths and serious injuries is down by 36 per cent. in the past decade and the number of fatalities in 2007 and 2008, for example, was lower than at any time for 80 years.

At the end of April, we launched a consultation on our new long-term road safety strategy, which will come into force in 2010. Although it draws on many important lessons that we have learned from the current strategy, it also sets out a fresh range of initiatives and ideas to meet our future objectives. The proposed strategy starts from the clear premise that despite recent successes, current casualty rates and particularly death rates are still far too high. Although we have reduced the number of serious injuries on our roads by 37 per cent. in the period covered by the current strategy, deaths have come down by only 18 per cent. If the next decade's strategy is to be successful, we need to be bold. That is why the consultation sets out a long-term vision not only to improve road safety, but to make Britain's roads the safest in the world.

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I appreciate that I have stopped the Minister in his prime, only two minutes into his speech, but he has said that the number of deaths is still far too high. Surely he would agree that motoring, like many other activities in life, can never be entirely risk free. He makes great play of the fact that there have been significant reductions in the past year and that fatalities are at their lowest level for many decades. Does he have a figure in mind for an acceptable number of deaths, given that inevitably a balance must be struck between addressing what is obviously a risky undertaking and ensuring that there is relatively swift movement on the roads for the many millions of our fellow countrymen who wish to go from A to B?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point. We have been having a discussion in the Department, pressed on us by outside campaign groups, about redefining what is happening on our roads by saying that people are not having accidents; they are having incidents, crashes and collisions. That is because analysing the incidents and the causes of deaths shows that the vast majority are caused by human decisions: people not wearing seat belts, people speeding or people drinking or taking drugs. Those are conscious decisions that people are making, which are putting their own lives and other people's at risk. That is not to say that accidents do not happen. A tyre can blow out. Something unexpected can happen, such as trees falling. We recognise that there is an element of danger in any activity, and driving is no different. However, we can affect human behaviour and introduce technology, which I shall go on to describe—I am thinking of road engineering and car safety features—to bring down the number of deaths and injuries.

Eight people a day are still killed on our roads. Tens of thousands in the course of a year are seriously injured. Their lives are ruined and their families have to pick up the pieces. That is a social disaster, but we can improve the situation a great deal if we take the appropriate steps, and we have been doing that for many years and particularly for the past 10 to 20 years.

As I said, I genuinely do not see this as a party political issue. On one or two elements of the strategy—for example, speed cameras—there are disagreements between colleagues on Government policy. However, I think that those on the Front Benches are relatively well disposed towards the use of speed cameras. There is cross-party consensus on many of the issues. If we change the language so that instead of talking about accidents that happen to people, we say that they are incidents that are caused in the main by human behaviour, we shift the responsibility from society having accidents to individuals causing crashes, collisions and incidents that kill either themselves or other people. That switch of language is important. That is not to say that accidents cannot happen, but the vast majority can be prevented because they are caused by human behaviour.

Mr. Field: Implicitly, the Minister understands that driving is inherently a hazardous activity and therefore, to a large extent, some accidents will genuinely be accidents. He is right to refer to the lack of a seat belt, drunken-driving and massively excessive speeding. All of those are factors in some accidents, but does he not agree that we will reach a level that might be regarded, although we do not want anyone to die on our roads, as acceptable? I am talking about a point at which a lot has already been done in all the areas that we are discussing, but there are still a number of deaths because of the

[Mr. Mark Field]

intrinsic hazard that comes with driving. One of the dangers, whether this is in relation to individual freedoms that are being upset or the concern that I have often expressed on speed cameras, is that too much is driven by money raising, rather than simply safety aspects.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am content to agree that we shall never be able completely to eliminate deaths and serious injuries on the roads. However, we do collectively agree that the majority of deaths and serious injuries on the roads—we can statistically demonstrate this—are caused deliberately, by people flouting the rules of the road or doing something that endangers themselves or others. Given that, there is an awfully long way to go before we reach a point at which we might start thinking that we cannot go much further. At the moment, we know that we can go further, because we can see the progress in other European countries.

However, having made the reasonable progress that we have in the past 10 to 20 years, each year it becomes harder to improve because, as we reduce the element of risk—having improved our performance, whether by enforcement, road engineering, legislating or changing human behaviour—we reduce the space in which improvement can be made. We shall never completely eliminate deaths and serious injuries, but at the moment we are nowhere near the position that the hon. Gentleman describes.

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The Minister is right to say that this is not a matter for party political bickering. Does he agree, though, that unlike cases of aeroplane crashes, in which the air accident investigation is aimed at finding the cause of the accident, in some cases the police may be a little preoccupied with finding a person to prosecute, rather than looking at some of the wider issues that may have contributed to the accident?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am not sure that I agree entirely. It may well be that different investigations lead to different outcomes and are driven by different emotions at the time or professional stimuli. However, a thorough and investigative procedure for each incident is needed to determine whether it was an accident or caused by something that could be eliminated by Government action or changes that car manufacturers could be asked to make.

There has been a strong push from some road safety campaign groups for road crashes to be taken out of police jurisdiction and handed to the Health and Safety Executive. They take that view because a big factor in causing deaths on the road is fatigue among people whose work is driving. It can often be demonstrated that they have been driving for too long and should have taken a break or been able to rely on a reserve driver. The Department has resisted that call. Notwithstanding the fact that they are accidents at work, we support the Home Office because we believe that the police are better equipped more thoroughly to investigate road crashes and have greater expertise to identify the causes. We can learn strong lessons from police reports to coroners courts, for instance.

I do not fully accept the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. It may be the case in some investigations, but I have not seen evidence of it. We will obviously do all that we can to ensure that police investigate the causes of accidents and are not simply looking to prosecute people—a tick-box conclusion to the fact that somebody has died.

In the long term, we are trying to make Britain's roads the safest in the world. Our primary target for 2020 is therefore to reduce deaths by a further third. We realise that such a target is ambitious, but we believe that it is grounded in reality—and, most important, is achievable. We also propose reducing serious injuries by 33 per cent. over the same time frame.

We acknowledge our moral responsibility to protect children and young people, so we propose reducing annual road deaths and serious injuries among that group by at least half by 2020. Our progress on reducing child casualties since 2000 was an improvement: we reduced child deaths and serious injuries by 55 per cent. from the previous baseline. However, that was for the nought-to-16 age group. Progress has been much less marked for the slightly older age groups, and we therefore propose extending the target to cover 16 and 17-year-olds.

To meet those goals, however, we cannot rely on making lots of new laws, piling legislation upon legislation. Instead, our philosophy must be to concentrate on improving the delivery of road safety, in particular homing in on those roads, people and behaviours most associated with casualties.

We need to tackle the hard cases. For example, to improve safety on rural roads, which carry only 42 per cent. of all traffic but which see 60 per cent. of all road deaths, we propose to publish maps every year highlighting the main roads with the poorest safety records, so that highway authorities can take action with their partners to tackle those routes.

We will also encourage the authorities to reduce speed limits on rural single carriageways, on a targeted basis—I repeat that it will be on a targeted basis; I tended to get into some difficulty with certain parliamentary colleagues who thought that we were proposing a blanket approach, but that was never the case—and we would be looking to reduce speed limits from the current 60 mph national limit.

The level of danger on those roads varies widely, and we want the authorities to reduce speed limits on those roads that have the most crashes. We will continue to encourage investment in improved highway engineering, as it is clear that such schemes are continuing to reduce casualties at relatively low cost. We also want local authorities to improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists by establishing 20 mph zones and limits in streets of a primarily residential nature. Let me make this clear: they will not be major through routes that happen to have a few houses on them, but streets with the primary purpose of allowing access to our homes. These streets are for living in, not dying in. Over time, we expect the shift to 20 mph limits in those streets to make walking and cycling demonstrably safer, and to encourage people to do more of both.

We will not only continue to work in partnership with the motor industry to boost vehicle safety, but seek to raise awareness of driver and passenger safety. We expect crash protection improvements to focus on particular problems or types of accidents, and we believe that

advanced vehicle safety systems that help drivers and motorcyclists to avoid crashes will have the potential to reduce casualties significantly over the next decade. We recognise that people make mistakes in all walks of life, including on the roads, so we need to create a system where errors on the road are less likely to lead to death or serious injury, and more sophisticated vehicle safety technology and safer road engineering will help us to meet the challenge.

Alongside these technological advances, improving behaviour will continue to be at the heart of our road safety strategy up to 2020; we will support more responsible road use and tackle those who behave irresponsibly. Our consultation late last year on road safety compliance set out a number of proposals to crack down on those motorists who endanger not only their own lives but the lives of others by failing to adhere to the laws of the road. The proposals include higher penalty points for reckless speeding and strong measures to discourage the utterly irresponsible minority who drive while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Mr. Mark Field: No one would want to defend the so-called rights of irresponsible or dangerous drivers. As the Minister rightly points out, the Government propose additional points for reckless or excessive speeding—perhaps as many as six for each such incident.

Would it not be sensible, in conjunction with that, to recognise that for certain technical speeding offences—such as driving only a few miles per hour over the limit, perhaps in the middle of the night, when there is not really any danger to other road users, and particularly in relation to speed cameras—there should be something less than the standard three-point tariff? In other words, we should have a slightly more flexible tariff system, as regular drivers committing four relatively small technical offences within a three-year period would, as the Minister said, automatically get a six-month ban. Surely Parliament's intention was to have bans for the most reckless drivers.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman again makes a fair point. We considered the matter carefully. It was suggested last year, before we published our consultation document, that we might give licence for reducing penalty points for those people who slip over 30 mph into an excess speed.

Given that there are not many of us in the Chamber, may I say privately that we recognised when considering the matter that flexibility was already built into the system to allow for people who just slip over the limit? In addition, camera use is flexible and drivers can slip over a bit more. That is not the case everywhere, as some cameras are set to a rigid limit, but in a number of areas people would have to be doing more than 34 mph or 35 mph before being taken to task.

If we were to allow drivers to slip over the limit, they could be going at 38 mph or 39 mph—almost 40 mph—and still receive only two penalty points. "Think 30 for a reason", a slogan that we all recognise and which is promoted in our communities, would therefore be undermined. The campaign says that there is a far greater chance of a child living if hit at 30 mph rather than 40 mph.

The police are introducing speeding courses for drivers as an alternative to penalty points. The courses have been successfully trialled and will be rolled out across the country. That will allow drivers to take some refresher training rather than receiving penalty points. They will therefore be able to avoid topping up points on their licence. If double penalty points are introduced—we have not yet come forward with our conclusions on that—they will apply only to those who are recklessly speeding, which would be 20 mph over the limit. That would mean their driving at 55 mph or 60 mph in a 30 mph area.

We held discussions internally and with other groups when carrying out our informal consultation, and we found that it does not seem unreasonable for someone who is doing 36 mph, 37 mph or even 38 mph to be given a different penalty from someone who is doing 60 mph or 65 mph. The public are aware of that. The only thing that seems to bring speeders to book is the risk of losing their licence. We concluded, therefore, that accelerating that risk might also accelerate their move to more responsible behaviour. That is why we put that in the public domain.

The police speeding awareness courses have been successful. I was a bit sceptical myself when I heard about them, but I have since read some comments from participants who went along thinking, "This is great. I've avoided a penalty. All I have to do is sit through this for a day or two," but who came out saying, "It's changed my attitude to driving. It has really opened my eyes to the risk that I was putting myself and others through." So the courses appear to be very effective. And they tie in with our attempt to create lifelong learning procedures for drivers. At the moment, if a 17, 18 or 19-year-old passes their test, that is it for life. Fifty years later they might still be driving without having thought about the deterioration of their driving procedures. We want to change that philosophy, culture and behaviour. Our approach, which we have considered very seriously, fits in tidily with that. Those were our reasons for not introducing such a points system.

We will publish our conclusions to the consultation in the final version of the new road safety strategy. Tougher penalties and better enforcement are potent weapons in the battle against speeding—a battle that will be stepped up with the next 10-year strategy as we seek to make speeding as unacceptable to mainstream society as drink-driving has become. We have made good progress in recent years, but far too many drivers still regularly break the limits. Illegal and inappropriate speed was recorded as a contributory factor in 26 per cent. of road fatalities in 2007.

Some self-styled "petrol heads"—there are none here, of course—argue that we are obsessed by speed and that safety cameras are merely revenue-raisers. However, the independent evaluation of the national safety camera programme found a 42 per cent. reduction in the number of people killed or seriously injured at camera sites. That means that about 1,745 fewer people are being killed or seriously injured per annum.

Mr. Field: Presumably, therefore, the Minister accepts that 74 per cent. of accidents have nothing to do with speed. No one wants to encourage the most reckless speeders, but speed cameras do not stop some of the worst offenders—the unlicensed and uninsured drivers—who can be a much bigger hazard. One of the problems surely is that the erection of a speed camera often comes cheek by jowl with a policy of the local authority

[Mr. Mark Field]

to reduce the number of police in an area. That makes road conditions ever more hazardous. Presumably, among many of those 74 per cent. of accidents not related to speed, there are unlicensed and uninsured drivers, who should not be on the road at all. They might keep within limits, but none the less will be a hazard to themselves and other road users.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes some interesting and good points. We are making good progress on uninsured and unlicensed drivers and those whose vehicles are untaxed. That is owing to automatic number plate recognition cameras and the ability to cross-reference between the Motor Insurance Bureau's database and that of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The police can catch these people without having to be on the roads themselves. In recent years, the proportion of people in the categories that he mentioned has fallen from several per cent. to about 1 per cent. We are making very good progress and will continue to bear down on that.

We have always said—I shall return to this later—that speed cameras are a tool and ought not to be permanent, and that their performance ought to be reviewed by local authorities. There is no use in erecting a camera and just leaving it. If behaviour in that area improves, the cost of running the cameras might be better used by moving them to a different site. We have also made the point strongly that road policing is not stand-alone policing. If somebody is insured or unlicensed, if their car is not taxed, or if they are not obeying other road laws, they are much more likely not to be obeying the rest of society's laws.

Police forces are now telling us that examinations of cars and individuals whom they stop for a road traffic offence are leading to arrests for very serious offences, including drugs trafficking, money laundering and gun possession—they might be found in the back of their car. That is a good way to bear down on the criminal fraternity, because if people are not obeying road traffic laws, they might well not be obeying other rules. Using the national police statistics—I cannot remember the acronym of the relevant body—the police are tracking the types of road traffic offence for which they are issuing penalty notices. In recent years, therefore, the Department for Transport and the Home Office have been working together very closely.

Our evidence suggests that, in addition to motorists slowing down in the immediate vicinity of cameras, they have been slowing down in the wider area. As for revenue-raising, as far as we are concerned, the best camera is the one that takes no pictures because motorists are sticking to the limits, improving the safety of the whole community. We will support responsible road use by channelling our road safety messages through the successful Think! brand, and by improving education and driver training and testing.

We also recently published the results of our learning to drive consultation, which was launched last year, and will now proceed with plans to strengthen the way in which people learn to drive and are tested, and subsequently encourage a culture of continued and lifelong learning for drivers. This long-term programme supports progressive improvements. The first phase, over the next two years, aims to deliver real changes to the learning process, with improved theory and more practical driving tests. This includes a new pre-driver qualification in safe road use for 14 to 16-year-olds. We have also recently launched the new Think! education programme, and are publishing the first in a range of resources and materials for three to 14-year-olds and their teachers and parents. Taken together, these materials will help us to provide a seamless and thorough system of road safety training and development for life, so that we can foster a new respect for the road in the minds of the next generation of drivers and non-drivers.

Throughout the consultation, which runs until mid-July, we will be genuinely interested to hear views from all quarters. It is especially important for all of us in positions of influence to raise awareness of road safety as a national issue. We can make our roads the safest in the world only through a shared aspiration to reduce death and injury rates and by persuading everyone to contribute. Our consultation proposes the publication of an annual road safety report and an independent advisory body. That will ensure that we have a discussion that involves government, local authorities, police, schools and universities, car manufacturers and transport groups. It will also involve parliamentarians, and I look forward to hearing hon. Members' views.

2.58 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this debate. It is a pity that more people are not here—but I think we all know the reasons for that.

I would like to reiterate some of the Minister's comments. We have made many improvements in road safety in recent years, and our track record compares extremely favourably with other EU countries with similar circumstances to ours. When I entered Parliament, I was very aware of the many pressures facing local government in prioritising funding, and yet I was extremely surprised by the number constituency groups campaigning for traffic-calming measures in their areas. My county council identified about 200 sites where residents had requested measures to curtail speeding. The problem is that, while walking around our communities, we want cars to go much slower. When we see people who are slow to cross the road being taken by surprise by a speeding car, or children suddenly running out inadvertently into the road, we can all appreciate why we do not want drivers racing through built-up areas.

Technology has advanced so much that sometimes the very same people who worry about speed in front of their own front doors inadvertently go above 20, 30 and even 40 mph when they get behind the wheel in a built-up area. That is because driving is now so smooth. In my childhood, when we used to bounce up and down in the back of a very uncomfortable car—it was a bit like being on the Back Benches at Prime Minister's Question Time with one's colleagues jumping up and down on very uncomfortable seats—a little bit of speed was very noticeable. Now, of course, a person can drive at considerable speed without even noticing.

I welcome the Minister's references to changing behaviour. Essentially, we have three options. We can put in more and more traffic-calming measures, such as islands in the middle of roads, speed cameras and all sorts of markings and bumps; consider using snooper technology that tells off drivers every time they go too

fast, which I find offensive; or change our behaviour. Those who talk about changing behaviour are often accused of being idealistic. However, our attitude to drink-driving has changed noticeably over the years. Similarly, the once much-ridiculed smoking ban is very much welcomed and accepted now. The same is true of seat belts. Child seat belts were unheard of when I was a child, but no parent now would think of going out without having the car properly prepared for young children.

There are three categories of road to consider. First, there is the urban road. In Wales, we have Assembly-funded programmes for calming the traffic in the immediate vicinity of schools. I have to congratulate my own county council—Carmarthenshire—on having drawn down considerable sums of funding to implement such schemes. However, the urban area is very much wider than just the areas in front of schools and often includes parts of trunk roads, which run through very built-up areas. We must think carefully about how else we can calm down traffic.

The second type of road—the rural road—is common in my county. There is a very high number of deaths on rural roads. People think, "Oh, this is a lovely country road, let's put our foot down and enjoy it." Even people who are familiar with such roads can suddenly be surprised by something coming out of a gateway. It could be an animal, a child or a farm vehicle. It could be an obstacle of some description or something that has happened that they did not expect. Unfortunately, because drivers are going at speed, such accidents can be much more gruesome, with consequences that are considerably more serious than those we see in accidents on other types of road.

The third type of road is the national motorway or dual carriageway. I have long advocated trying to get a culture in which we genuinely reduce speed. In the past, fast food was all the rage, but now we want to go for slow cooking. It is a mentality or an idea. For example, people think that it takes one hour to drive from Llanelli to Cardiff, but they should think that it will take an hour and a half. We should adjust our mentality to accept a more sensible speed. That is not easy. A couple of years ago, I suggested, to much hilarity, that one way of changing our speed limits in this country would be to interpret all our speed signs that are currently interpreted as meaning miles per hour as meaning kilometres per hour. In other words, when a driver sees a sign saying 30, it would mean not 30 mph but 30 kph, which is just under 20 mph. At the time, people thought I was mad. Now we are hearing many more people saying, "20 is plenty" in our urban areas and particularly around our schools. It is certainly a measure that we could consider both in our urban areas and on our country roads. I very much welcome the mapping system that the Minister referred to for country roads. As for motorways, different issues are involved, and I am not the expert to say what a good speed limit would be. None the less, when we travel at high speeds we must be aware of unexpected events such as a tyre blow-out. By travelling at lower speeds, we can considerably reduce the number of accidents.

The psychology of using a human image is very effective. It affects people's mentality when they are shown that a child is far more likely to be injured by a car that is speeding, or when motorway roadworks have a sign saying, "Do not kill our work force". Such images are much more effective than a sign warning drivers to slow down at 40 mph when they cannot see a roadwork in sight. It is important to get that message across. We should not be waiting for people to break speed limits and offend before we put them on training courses. The psychology must be there. We should start at school level by talking to pupils about road safety and showing graphic images, and continue that through the process of taking a driving test. We need to keep up that knowledge throughout life. All advertisers will say how the effects of any campaign fade and people go back to their old habits. We must look at ways in which we can develop a society that says, "Although we have the technological power to go at the most fantastic speeds, that is not the best thing to do in most circumstances." We need to persist with this campaign and work hard. We can put in a number of concrete measures, such as islands, stripes, bumps and speed cameras—if we can afford them, because the budget is sometimes limited—but we need to change our mentality.

Having said that, some concrete changes can be considered. A short while ago in my constituency, we experienced two deaths on a dual carriageway that comes immediately off the M4. People can drive for three and a half hours down from London with not a single obstacle, and suddenly they go round a roundabout and find themselves on a dual carriageway where cars can come in and out from small side roads. That is an extremely dangerous situation. I am referring to the M4 at the point where it reaches Pont Abraham and becomes the A48. The A48 goes on to Cross Hands through Cwmgwili, which is where the two accidents took place, and on to Carmarthen and St. Clears.

Ever since a very serious accident some 20 years ago, a number of us have been calling for the road to be made into an express road with exits and entries similar to those on a motorway. Then we would not have people crossing the carriageway. I am sure that hon. Members can think of similar roads near to them. We must consider improving road safety on dual carriageways and main trunk roads that form part of a network, because the people on them are likely to be travelling at some speed. We also need to make people aware of the types of junctions they will encounter coming in and out of those roads. That is a particular problem in areas such as the rural parts of Wales and England.

We must also consider how we treat cyclists. We all know the benefits of cycling—how healthy it can be and how it can reduce pollution. I recently had the tremendous pleasure of cycling with my young nieces along the millennium coastal path in Llanelli, where there are no cars. I quite understand that we cannot have such a cycle path on every route because obviously, there is not the space, and we want to be able to encourage people to cycle on ordinary roads as well; but we need to consider a number of measures if we are to do that.

I welcome the commitment in the draft road safety strategy to trying to reduce the risks for cyclists, possibly halving the risks involved within 10 years. We need to look at how we encourage people to cycle, as well as at ways of improving junctions and space for cyclists, because of the issue of "critical mass"; it is much safer for cyclists when people are used to seeing them and expect them to be there. Again, it is a matter of attitude. France is a great country for cycling, and there is a strict understanding there that drivers leave a metre between

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their vehicle and a cyclist. We need to work with our drivers on the idea that overtaking a cyclist is like overtaking a motorbike: often, drivers need as much space as they would to overtake a car, and they should not expect to be able to scrape past a cyclist when a car is coming in the opposite direction, unless the road is sufficiently wide. The measures that we take to reduce dangers to cyclists should include ways of encouraging cyclists.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way—which will perhaps let her pause for breath and allow me to say that I fully support the points she has been making. She will know that the Department for Transport has committed £140 million over the next three years to promote cycling. I did not mention that because it is a different initiative, but it will contribute to trying to create the numbers she has been talking about. Through cycle demonstration towns, pathways and the promotion of cycling we shall get critical mass at some time in the next decade, as cycling comes more popular; I am convinced of that. From the road safety point of view, a strategy focusing on ways of reducing incidents, collisions and dangers to cyclists goes hand in hand with the sort of cycling promotion that my hon. Friend is suggesting.

Nia Griffith: I welcome the Minister's remarks and look forward to improvements for cyclists.

Out-of-town shopping centres sometimes consist of a group of shops with roads and roundabouts between them. Often, it appears that they are in private ownership and that little consideration has been given to how anyone can cross from one part of the shopping centre to another after getting out of their car—whether they are an ordinary pedestrian, someone with a pushchair or a disabled person. Sometimes, it is almost safer for them to jump back into their car and drive 50 yd to another part of the shopping park, so that they do not have to cross a busy road or roundabout where no provision has been made for pedestrians. Can any measures be taken to ensure that all private developers of such retail parks must undertake to provide appropriate safety?

Anyone who has walked into Westminster underground station recently will have seen the poster campaign on shared space—those areas where people do not know whether cars are allowed, and where cyclists certainly do not know what they are allowed to do. For those pedestrians who may be vulnerable, perhaps because of poor sight or hearing, shared space can be extremely confusing. That also applies to retail parks. Sometimes it is not at all clear where the trolleys, people, pushchairs and wheelchairs are supposed to move in and out between the moving cars. One of the problems for motorists is that they are sometimes not sure which way they should be driving—all the way down one column and all the way back up another, or in a two-way system. The situation is often not as clear as it should be, and such confusion can make things hazardous for pedestrians. What steps can be taken on that issue?

3.15 pm

Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to contribute to today's debate under your chairmanship, Mr. Benton. I am also pleased that the Government have chosen to request a debate on road safety. It is always timely to discuss issues of such importance.

I acknowledge, as other hon. Members have done, that there has been considerable progress, but road accidents are still responsible for hundreds of thousands of injuries each year. It is also pertinent to mention that they are the biggest killer of people in the five to 35 age group, despite that progress. Those injured, and the families of those killed or injured, have to face great emotional and financial suffering. It is also significant, in the current economic climate, that we recognise that road accidents cost our economy 1.5 per cent. of our annual gross domestic product. That is the equivalent of what the Government spent in total on transport in 2006-07, so we are not talking about small sums of money. It therefore follows—I am sure we all agree on this—that we should do as much as possible to reduce the number of deaths and accidents on our roads. As we have heard from other hon. Members, roads should be safe for everyone—pedestrians, cyclists, car drivers, motorcyclists and HGV drivers.

There has been some positive news about road safety, not least of which is the fact that roads deaths fell below 3,000 in 2007 for the first time since 1926. That is certainly good progress. The Government's new consultation on road safety, "A Safer Way", is also to be welcomed. However, as I think we would all agree, there is no room for complacency. There are still nearly 250,000 casualties on our roads each year, including some 3,000 children who were killed or seriously injured in 2007 alone. To make our roads safer we first need to know why accidents occur, as well as where, when and how, and who is involved. We need to know those things to enable us to develop better policies that get to the heart of the problem and help to reduce road accidents, injuries and deaths. We also need urgently to review how we collect information about road accidents. The current system for reporting them relies not only on accidents being reported in the first place—we all know that that does not always happen—but on the police accurately assessing the level of injury sustained. A comparison with hospital data suggests that too many accidents go unreported or underestimated. There has been much criticism of the STATS—road accident statistics—system, not least by the Select Committee on Transport, and the review of the system mentioned in the Government's consultation document gives us an opportunity to change how we record accidents.

Licensing and seatbelt information, for example, should be recorded as standard so that we can understand all the factors that contribute to road accidents and injuries. Until we know how many road accidents there are, who is involved in them and what caused them, we cannot adequately plan road safety policy. That is why—this was touched on in an intervention—we, along with organisations such as the RAC, are calling for the creation of a road accidents investigation branch similar to the rail, maritime and air accidents investigation branches. It would gather accurate data about road accidents, analyse the data and make recommendations to Government on road safety. The Government consultation states that they do not think that that is necessary because the police already investigate accidents, but does the Minister agree that there is a difference between the role and work of the police in deciding who

is responsible for accidents and the work that needs to be done to establish in a broader sense why accidents happen? The expert panel that the Government have suggested is in our view simply not enough. A national authority, with the same powers and responsibilities as the rail, maritime and aviation bodies is necessary. Why does the Minister think that it is appropriate to have an investigation branch for rail, maritime and aviation incidents, but not one for road incidents?

Drink-driving continues to be one of the biggest problems on our roads. As the Minister will be aware, there may be a difference of opinion between the parties on this issue. The number of road deaths involving drink-drivers has remained the same over the past decade, while the total number of deaths has fallen considerably. In 2007 alone—the last full year for which figures are available—16 per cent. of road deaths involved a drink-driver. The Liberal Democrats have for some time been calling for the drink-drive limit in the UK to be brought in line with that in most of the rest of Europe, from 80 mg to 50 mg per 100 ml of blood.

As the Minister knows, that has the support of many industry experts, including the British Medical Association, the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and Brake. Reducing the drink-drive limit would save lives by sending a clear message that "just another drink" will put people over the limit. As he may also be aware, University college London has estimated that such a measure could prevent some 65 deaths and 230 injuries a year. In the light of that, will he assure us that he at least retains an open mind on the issue, and that if he is not yet convinced, he will continue to consider the evidence that many of us believe is already compelling?

I was pleased to hear the Government announcement on roadside drugs testing, but I remain sceptical that the specification for a device will be approved, despite the fact that the technology is available. A reply to a parliamentary question I asked in 2008 assured me that departmental advisers were continuing their work to produce such a specification and that they hoped to reach a conclusion soon. What assurance can the Minister give the House today that the announcement earlier this month will actually end in a device specification being agreed and the device being used on the roadside?

Thirty per cent. of car accidents involve at least one car driver under 25 years old, so young and novice drivers are much more likely to be involved in accidents than other groups of drivers. To be clear, it is not that all young drivers drive dangerously—most do not—but many do not get adequate training or experience of driving in adverse conditions.

The current driving test focuses heavily on controlling and manoeuvring the car, not on driving independently and in hazardous situations. I therefore welcome the Government's response to the "Learning to Drive" consultation and the inclusion of a section on independent driving in the practical test. I was disappointed, however, that the response did not include the suggestion made by many of the consultation respondents that certain types of driving should be a compulsory part of the learning and assessment process, including driving on urban roads in busy traffic, on quiet rural and one-track roads and motorways, and in bad weather and at night. Does the Minister agree that those skills should be part of the process and that they should not be learned on the hoof by novice drivers once they have passed their test?

Mr. Goodwill: The Conservatives considered that proposal. However, one problem is that it would be difficult to require learner drivers, for example, to participate in motorway driving in all parts of the country—my constituents are 60 miles away from the nearest motorway.

Mark Hunter: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Of course there are different circumstances in individual areas. I am articulating the case that we have not gone far enough. The Government might consider ways in which to introduce a different kind of test and ensure that those areas of expertise are covered before people pass the test, and that they are not an afterthought or something that people learn on the hoof afterwards.

Also on learner drivers, in the current economic climate I am concerned that many young people could be tempted to cut corners when it comes to learning to drive because of the cost of the process. Recent estimates suggest that people on average are spending £1,500 on lessons before they become holders of a full driving licence—*[Interruption.]* I may have misread the Minister's expression, but he appears to be surprised at that figure. I can tell him that it is from the "Learning to Drive" consultation paper.

There is no doubt that £1,500 is a lot of money to a lot of people. The danger is that in this economic climate, when times are tough and when pennies are being counted in most households around the country, people might be tempted to take fewer formal lessons and perhaps take more assistance and advice from friends and relatives, and cut back on the necessary expert tuition in which I am sure we all believe. Has the Minister had any recent meetings with insurance companies to discuss incentivised lower premiums for young drivers who take more training and driver development?

My strongest criticism is of the lack of progress on the problem of uninsured drivers. An estimated 5 per cent. of all drivers in this country—about 1.5 million drivers—are driving without insurance. Those people add about £30 to the cost of each driver's insurance policy because they choose to opt out. We know from evidence that those drivers will kill four people each week on our roads. In 2006, they were directly responsible for 36,000 crashes and 27,000 injuries.

Meanwhile, incredibly, the average fine for uninsured drivers has dropped by 13 per cent. since 1997, from £224 to £194—those figures were given to me in a recent parliamentary answer—which is lower than the fine many people get for failing to buy a TV licence. That is a sad indictment of the priorities that are recognised by the courts these days. Will the Minister undertake to lobby his colleagues in the Ministry of Justice so that they can change the advice given to courts on the level of fines for driving without insurance and so avoid the crazy situation of the cost of the fine being far less than the cost of the insurance, which happens in many cases? That provides no incentive whatever for those who are minded, wrongly, to do without insurance.

The final issue that I should like to address is speeding, which others have mentioned. I have long been a supporter of the campaign to change the default speed limit in residential areas from 30 mph to 20 mph. The importance

[Mark Hunter]

of the issue was brought home to me just last week when I was going from door to door in the Stepping Hill ward in my constituency. Time and again, residents of Lyndhurst avenue, which has already been designated a 20 mph zone by Stockport council, told me of the problem that they face on a daily basis of boy racers and others rat-running at excessive speed through what should be quiet residential areas. The same applies to the Arundel avenue area of Hazel Grove, and I am sure such problems are not uncommon. The danger to pedestrians, particularly children and the elderly, is obvious, but this is also a basic quality of life issue for people who live in such areas, who are fed up because of the behaviour of a minority of inconsiderate car drivers.

The consultation sets out clearly the danger caused by speeding and accepts that 20 mph zones not only reduce the severity of injuries, but reduce by some 70 per cent. the number of accidents involving pedestrian injuries, as we have heard. It also states that the Government will encourage local authorities to introduce 20 mph zones. That is good news, but I am concerned that because the current systems and protocols require local authorities to obtain police evaluations or consent from the Government, they are too unwieldy and difficult to allow 20 mph zones to be introduced swiftly where they are needed. Will the Minister commit to a review of the way in which local authorities apply for 20 mph zones and try to make it easier for speed limits to be based on local circumstances?

Finally, we are all aware that without enforcement, many of these policies are toothless. Quite simply, drivers must know that they will be caught if they break the rules. We need more police officers on the roads to spot dangerous drivers. People who use mobile phones while driving, drink and drug drivers and those who speed need to know that they can and will be caught. Too many drivers feel that they are beyond the long arm of the law. That must change sooner rather than later.

3.31 pm

Mr. Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr. Benton. This debate is particularly timely as my second son passed his driving test yesterday. We now have two to worry about.

When a train or an aeroplane crashes, as happened this week, it dominates the headlines for days. However, every day of the week, death on our roads goes unnoticed by the national media. The number of people killed on our railways in the 36 years between 1967 and 2002 was 2,903. As hon. Members are aware, that is lower than the number of motoring-related fatalities in the single year of 2007, which saw 2,943 men, women and children die on Britain's roads. The death toll on our roads is a continuing tragedy about which none of us—whether in government or in opposition—should ever be complacent. Whether as road safety officers, car manufacturers or motorists behind the wheel, everybody has a part to play in addressing this tragedy.

I welcome the extent of the cross-party consensus. There is tripartite consensus in this important area. Whenever we feel that the Government do the right thing or come up with the right answer, we will not hesitate to give them our full backing. The Minister has not been tempted into gimmicky suggestions that do not have the support of scientific research, which some politicians might have been tempted to introduce.

Much of the progress over recent years is due to major improvements in car design and safety features. We must congratulate car manufacturers on their important achievements in that area. However, it would be unwise to over-rely on advances in car safety technology and expect it to provide all the answers. Since 2004, the annual decrease in the number of people killed has averaged only 3 per cent. No one should be comfortable with that plateau. We have slipped down the international league. We used to lead Europe, but the Swedes have passed us.

There are three groups of drivers that we are concerned about and must address: drink-drivers, young drivers and motorcyclists. One of the most worrying dangers on our roads today is drink-driving. In 2007, drunk drivers caused 460 fatal accidents. Over half the drivers killed at night were over the limit. There have been welcome advances over the last 30 years to crack down on drink-driving. A key factor in that success is the UK's tough approach to punishment, in particular the 12-month ban.

The importance I attribute to that gold standard of punishment is one reason I am yet to be convinced that an across-the-board reduction to 50 mg is the right way to tackle drink-driving. European countries with lower limits tend to have a range of penalties for different alcohol levels. In Portugal, the minimum ban for drink-driving is 15 days. In Austria, the maximum is one month. A blanket reduction in the blood alcohol limit in the UK would inevitably give rise to pressure to introduce graduated penalties. Reducing or diluting the penalties for drink-driving would be deeply unwise and would send completely the wrong signal. Anybody who thinks that fines and points will be effective should look at the hundreds of thousands of people who are caught speeding every year, for which those are the penalties.

As well as the obvious deterrent value, the signal sent by the UK's tough approach to punishing drink-driving has played an important role in the cultural shift during the latter years of the 20th century. It has become steadily more socially unacceptable to drink and drive. That cannot be said of every country in the world and it is a behavioural change that we jeopardise at our peril. It is a precious advantage that we should not undervalue.

The UK seems to be lagging behind a number of countries on the issue of drug-driving. We still rely on the field impairment test, or FIT, which is the test that was used prior to the introduction of breathalysers by Barbara Castle. It involves the person suspected of being under the influence walking along the white line on the road. The authorities in France, Germany, Belgium, Romania, Croatia, Italy, Australia, Spain, Switzerland, Finland, Iceland, the Czech Republic and Luxemburg have authorised roadside drug-testing equipment, which is deployed and in use. Why is the UK falling behind?

When choosing which drug to take, people might decide that alcohol is more likely to land them with a ban than other drugs. As well as roadside drug-testing equipment, we should look at the offence. At the moment, the offence is driving while impaired. If we had accurate blood or saliva testing, the offence would have to be reviewed and become an offence of having drugs in

one's system. A consequent problem is that although a level could be set above which driving is likely to be impaired, the drugs being dealt with are illegal, unlike alcohol. One solution would be the Director of Public Prosecutions judging at what level prosecutions should be brought, even though having any drug in one's system would be an offence. The shadow Home Office and justice teams are at an early stage in negotiations on this difficult issue. I am sure that the Minister has had similar discussions.

Young men are a major source of problems on our roads. A toxic combination of inexperience, overconfidence and an inappropriate attitude to risk means that young men sadly often fill the pages of local newspapers following nasty accidents. Achieving attitudinal change must be a crucial goal in tackling the problem effectively. A number of ideas in the Government's consultation paper on improving education on road safety are attractive. In particular, I welcome the emphasis on viewing learning to drive as a long-term ongoing process, rather than as a one-off test. That point was made by my predecessors in the Conservative transport team during the passage of the Road Safety Act 2006.

I hope that the Government consultation will result in an improved driving test. Some suggestions made by the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mark Hunter) are worthy of consideration. The Conservative party has suggested that the manoeuvres—the three-point turn, reversing round a corner and parallel parking—could be taken out of the test and instead be signed off by an instructor. That would buy valuable time in the test, so that there would not have to be a more expensive driving test, which could have the effect of deterring young people from taking the test.

Motorcyclists make up only 1 per cent. of road traffic but account for 19 per cent. of casualties. I have great concerns about the way in which the new motorcycle driving test was introduced. It was delayed. The answer to a parliamentary question by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Lembit Öpik) revealed that within the first three weeks of the test being in operation, there were 14 incidents involving the 50 mph swerve and break aspect. Ten of those incidents resulted in injury and three people were taken to hospital, two of whom were blue-lighted by ambulance. What is the Minister's view on the risks related to that aspect of the test? It is very daunting for a driver to be faced with the examiner checking with a radar gun that he is travelling at 50 mph, and then to have to do a particular manoeuvre. We want to make sure that the risks involved in that aspect of the test are not such that the Department could be held liable for some serious injury. We are also concerned about the distance that people still have to travel for their test. Young riders could conclude that they might as well keep riding with L-plates rather than make a long journey of up to 30 or 40 miles each way to take the test.

I am interested in some of the new Mayor of London's suggestions, which could be adopted around the country. Research on motorcycles using bus lanes, which the previous Mayor tried to suppress, has shown the advantages of that practice, so I hope that it can be extended around the country. Boris has also suggested that cyclists should be allowed to turn left when lights are red so that they can get out of the way before the lights change and heavy lorries turn, as they often use their rear wheels to cut the corner and can get the cyclists. Some people say that cyclists go anyway in London, but that seems to be a London phenomenon, as other cyclists around the country seem to be much more law-abiding. Certainly, as long as there is no risk to pedestrians, I hope that the Mayor will be allowed to progress with that idea when the full risk assessment has been done.

The Minister might know that the Opposition have suggested changing the speed limit for large goods vehicles on single carriageway trunk roads. Currently, the speed limit for lorries on trunk roads is 40 mph, which we believe to be unacceptably low because it leads to accidents being caused by frustrated drivers overtaking in dangerous places. The head-on accidents that often follow from that dangerous manoeuvre are some of the worst accidents on our roads. Some supermarket lorries even have an apology on the back to explain to following motorists that they are travelling so slowly—unreasonably slowly, in some people's view—because of the law. Has the Minister looked into that? I think that an increase in the speed limit would, unusually, improve road safety. Indeed, as many people who use the trunk roads know, many lorries already ignore that law.

I know that the Department has looked at some research on intelligent speed adaptation, where cars are fitted with a device that will, unless overridden, limit the car's speed to the speed limit. My car has a speed limiter, which I can set manually—it is always a good idea for a shadow Transport Minister to try to drive within the speed limit. It would be sensible for satellite navigation systems that flash up the speed limit to be linked to that adaptation, not with any compulsion, but for people who do not want to pick up any points. I suspect that people who have nine points on their licence would be very attracted by the idea of a car in which it would be impossible to break the speed limit. When driving around a town where one does not know all the roads, it is often quite difficult to be sure what the speed limit is on any part of the road. I know that a trial has been done in Leeds with eight Skodas that were fitted with that mechanism, and the majority of the drivers who used it thought it was good. We do not want to impose that mechanism on people against their will, but I would like to hear the Minister's view on whether the industry would be keen to make it an option in cars.

The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) talked about shared space, which I am not a great fan of, although my predecessor, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), was more of a fan. I thought that she missed the whole point of shared space, which is that motorists are not sure where they should drive and so they drive very cautiously. The problem is when a motorist is on a piece of road and there is a green light in front of him, particularly if the road has fencing along each side, and he knows that the limit is 30 and goes for it. In a shared space system, which might be appropriate in some town centres, there is no certainty on anyone's part, be they a cyclist, pedestrian or car driver, as to where people have a right of way, so motorists proceed very cautiously. The evidence from the Netherlands, where that system has been adopted more widely, is that it results in better road safety. I know that there are concerns about how it would work

[Mr. Robert Goodwill]

with blind and partially sighted persons, but it would be useful to have some pilot projects in the UK to see how it would work out. I am not altogether sold on the idea, but seeing is believing.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on some of the questions I have raised, and I assure him, as I am sure that the Liberal Democrats would also do, that when he makes sensible proposals that will result in less carnage on our roads, we will be more than happy to try to support him however we can.

3.45 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am pleased to respond—briefly, I anticipate—to some of the points that have been raised. In my introductory comments, I omitted to pay tribute to the hon. Members for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Goodwill) and for Cheadle (Mark Hunter) for their contributions to policy development and to raising the profile of road safety. As I said, the issue is not party political. It is a genuine cross-party, cross-House campaigning issue on which there is much common ground and on which we can benefit from each party's assessment of proposed policies.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) for being here and contributing to the debate, because we all know of the pressures on colleagues, particularly today—indeed, we can see that from looking around the Chamber. She made one comment about child seat belts, which we all know about, and most of us would not think of going out with kids in the car without belting them into the back. I was at Bromley-by-Bow tube station at half-past 6 this morning, waiting for colleagues to turn up to engage in some activities—she will probably understand why I was there at that time in the morning—and a car pulled up by the station. A chap was driving it with his wife in the passenger seat and two kids in the back who were not belted in. I could not believe it. I saw that there were belts, even though it was a relatively old car, so I knocked on his window, which is a bit of a risk in London at that time. The guy rolled his window down and I said, "Excuse me, sir, I'm terribly sorry, but you'll get a fine if you don't put seat belts on your kids in the back of the car, and, besides, it's very dangerous. If you have a crash, they'll go straight through the windscreen." I was surprised that his reaction was one of total politeness. He said, "Thank you very much. You're a really decent chap, and I'm very grateful that you pointed this out to me," and then strapped his kids in. I am not recommending that everybody should do that at any time in London, but I was pleased by that gentleman's reaction, and his kids are safer as a result of his attention.

I agree entirely with my hon. Friend's comments about rural roads and their dangers, particularly for people who are not used to driving on them and do not know about the risks of going around blind bends, or of something being in the road or coming out of a hedge. We hope that the mapping we propose to do will help to some extent, because it will flag up the most dangerous roads, so that when people plot their route or use their satnav, we might be able to give them some technological advice, in the years ahead, and tell them about those roads and the dangers they present.

We are collecting better information on 20 mph limits and zones. As we have all said, the policies that we propose to improve road safety should be evidence-based. A number of towns and cities have extensive knowledge and information about 20 mph limits and zones, which we are gathering within the Department so that we can share it with other local authorities and see what worked where, what did not work and why. We want to roll out better guidance so that we can promote 20 mph zones and limits.

Mark Hunter: Will the Minister give way?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman made this point very strongly, so I am happy to give way to him on it.

Mark Hunter: I am grateful to the Minister for his thoughtful responses to our questions. One concern about the limits is enforcement—I hope he will forgive me if he was about to come to that. In my constituency and the Greater Manchester conurbation, local police divisions no longer have their own separate traffic police as they have all been centralised in Manchester, which means that we see far less of them. It is generally understood that the police, certainly in our neck of the woods, are giving less priority to traffic offences than they were previously, although not everything can be a priority at the same time.

Does the Minister agree that the police need to be reminded about the importance of these issues and that they need to allocate reasonable resources towards trying to ensure that all these good schemes are enforced? We all support 20 mph zones. I implemented such zones outside schools when I was the leader of the council many years ago. They work, but they need to be enforced, and the police have a crucial role in that. Does he have any thoughts as to how the police might be reminded that this is a fairly important issue to them as well?

Jim Fitzpatrick: This is clearly an important issue. I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman about its significance. Given that the Home Office does not have a Secretary of State at present, perhaps I could make a comment under the radar.

My Department engages with the Home Office on a regular basis to ensure that we both share the best information and evidence. I have regular meetings with Chief Constable Giannasi who now leads for the Association of Chief Police Officers on road safety issues. The association is doing all that it can to ensure that the police in all the constabularies are giving enough attention to road safety. The pressures on the police mean that they are constantly moving their forces around to deal with priorities as they see them in different areas.

As the road safety Minister, I do all that I can to ensure that road safety is maintained as a high-profile issue for all local authorities and for all constabularies, and I know that ACPO does the same.

Mr. Goodwill: Has the Minister ever looked at the New Zealand experience of using school control zones, where 20 mph limits are advised by electronic signs which are activated only at times of the day that the head teacher determines? That means, for example, that the motorist does not have to comply with the limit at

3 o'clock in the morning or during school holidays, which means that they are more likely to comply when the lights are flashing.

Jim Fitzpatrick: At the risk of making this sound less exciting, I believe that Scotland has some of those signs as well. If the hon. Gentleman suggests that we should make a cross-party trip to New Zealand to have a look at them, someone might suggest that we should just go to Scotland. *The Daily Telegraph* might want to run a line on that, but perhaps we should not go there.

We are looking at that experience. Clearly, such signs make sense. However, as more and more community schools are being used during extended hours, a variable speed limit may be appropriate only from midnight until 7 in the morning. Those matters are under review. Clearly, common sense ought to prevail and we should ensure that we do not cause unnecessary congestion.

My hon. Friend asked about car park layouts and out-of-town shopping centres. Forgive me, I do not mean to absolve myself of responsibility, but it occurs to me that that is a matter for the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is a planning issue, and, as a planning matter, it ought to be, and I am sure is, taken into account during the planning process. Out-of-town centres should be required to have appropriate transport infrastructure to ensure that people using all modes of transport, including pedestrians and the vulnerable, can get around safely without resorting to using a car. That is apparently covered in guidance from DCLG about out-of-town centres. The Department for Transport contributes to and collaborates in its preparation.

I recognise the picture that my hon. Friend paints, because I have had the same experience myself. Perhaps she might want to take the issue up with DCLG and copy me into the correspondence. Again, as we have discussions with DCLG, it may be appropriate to look at what the latest information was, how recently it was refreshed, and whether it needs to be reviewed.

The hon. Member for Cheadle raised an interesting point about data. As he suggested, we are always keen to ensure that our information is as accurate as possible. I hear what he says about an accident investigation branch. However, the number of road casualties is completely different from the number of accidents dealt with by the marine, air and rail accident investigation branches.

We are proposing in our consultation document that a new independent panel should focus on the data that emerge on fatal accidents from expert police accident investigation, and, through that, give us a steer as to where we might want to be. As has been said, the marine accident investigation branch, air accident investigation branch and rail accident investigation branch have so few accidents to investigate that they can deal with them all. They do not have eight every day. We would have to create a whole new constabulary to investigate that many accidents.

We are proposing that an independent panel looks at the data—I can tell from the hon. Gentleman's body language that he is not entirely convinced. Neither am I. I do not think that we necessarily have this absolutely right, but we are proposing a national body to advise on make-up, what should be done and so on. We will also still have an advisory board. I am not sure that we will need that as well as an independent panel. Combining the two might create something more elaborate.

An annual report will be produced that we can debate, probably in this Chamber. Given the number of our constituents who are involved—we are talking about 3,000 people killed and 30,000 seriously injured each year—perhaps we should say that the debate is a more important issue for Parliament, and therefore make a bid for a full debate on the Floor of the main Chamber. I do not wish to detract from the importance of Westminster Hall in any way, Mr. Benton, but perhaps we should collectively lobby our parties for such a debate. It would raise the profile of road safety, and I am sure that more colleagues would be interested in contributing if we got time in the Chamber.

The annual report would at least give us a document. The independent panel would give us advice and recommendations on what we are doing right, what we are not doing right and where we should go, and then we could debate independent advice, Government policies and suggestions from outside and from campaign groups. We are moving into a different era. There will be a different dimension and different analysis in the years after 2010, which will be useful in promoting road safety and helping us to get casualty numbers down even further.

The hon. Members for Scarborough and Whitby and for Cheadle raised the issue of drink-driving. They perfectly and eloquently explained different views as to whether we should maintain or reduce the level. Our position is that we are genuinely open. We are looking at the submissions that we receive. We have alluded to the fact that we do not think that the evidence is there yet, but if we get evidence during the consultation period, obviously we would need to publish it and say whether we support a change.

However, as colleagues will know, we have already taken action. We have spent £4 million equipping all the police forces in England and Wales with the new digital breathalysers, which are evidentially approved. That means that we can cut out a loophole. When somebody is stopped and a blood or urine test is demanded, they are taken back to a police station. At the moment, if things are delayed for as long as possible—two or three hours—the person comes in under the radar when the test is finally done. The new digital breathalysers will close that loophole.

Currently, the evidence is that the number of people killed or seriously injured by people who have been drinking and who test between 50 to 80 mg is only 2 per cent. Should we change the law for 2 per cent., with all that that would involve in terms of calibration, legislation, police forces, social and cultural attitudes, the impact on rural communities and the licensed trade and so on, even though we are talking lives, which are absolutely important? Perhaps we should be going after those who kill or seriously injure the other 98 per cent.—the people who are over 80, 100, 150 mg—with better enforcement.

The new breathalysers will at least give us better data, and will do so in a short period of time. We do not have the data at present, but we will have better scientific evidence soon, and we will keep the matter under review. I am not saying that we will not change the level. Drink-driving and the level of alcohol in the system is

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

never a closed issue. It is constantly under review. We are constantly under pressure from ACPO and from campaign groups, and I know that the issue will not go away in Parliament either. As I said, our minds are open on the matter, and we will look at the evidence that comes in.

The hon. Member for Cheadle mentioned the cost of driving lessons, which was certainly an issue for us when we looked at driving training and testing and how to improve the situation. That it cost so much was a bit of a surprise at the time, but when we looked into the matter further and at the fact that only 44 per cent. of people pass their test each year—fewer pass their test first time—we found that it is the additional lessons that people have to take continuously that create the average fee of £1,500. It is our strongly held view that if we improve training to an appropriate level, more people will pass more quickly, which ought to save money in the long term; but again, the matter will continue to be examined.

The hon. Gentleman will know that measures have been introduced to tackle uninsured driving, including police powers to seize vehicles used on the road by uninsured drivers. Police powers have been improved to access information contained on the Motor Insurers Bureau database. In 2008, police seized about 185,000 vehicles. The seizure programme has contributed to improved compliance. From 2006 to 2008, police forces carried out spot checks on vehicles and found that the level of uninsured drivers fell by half in two years. The proportion of uninsured drivers fell to 1.2 per cent. from 1.9 per cent. The number of vehicles stopped that were without a current MOT fell from 4.2 to 1.5 per cent.; the proportion of drivers stopped who did not have a valid vehicle tax licence fell from 2 to 1 per cent.; and the level of drivers committing a serious offence, such as having no insurance or driving while disqualified, fell to 3.4 per cent. from 7.5 per cent.

That there is a cut of almost 50 per cent. across the board is simply because of technology such as computers and automatic number plate recognition cameras. The police are using the technology far more effectively. When we have continuous insurance enforcement, as we will relatively soon, we will be able to use that information as we use the TV licence-checking system at the moment. We will not need to check people on the road, just as we do not need vans going around detecting whether people have a TV receiver in their home. We will know where they live. They can be written to and, if they cannot explain why the vehicle is not taxed or insured, or has no MOT, they will be open to penalties. We will be bearing down much more strongly on such matters. The hon. Gentleman asked about the level of fines. From memory, I think that I have written to the Ministry of Justice on the matter, but I shall check and let him know. If I have not, I shall do so because it is a fair point. However, I am pretty confident that I have.

The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby voiced concerns about the drink-driving level. As I said, that is a live issue and will continue to be so. He also raised the question, as did other colleagues, of the attitude of young men. The foundations of a pre-driving qualification course for 14 to 16-year-olds in schools and colleges are proving very popular, because people feel that they will get a credit towards their theory test and that that will make the driving test easier for them. The course also informs them about how to behave in the back of a car—about belting up and not winding up the driver, which is one of the things that motivates young drivers to go faster. All the evidence shows that if one person belts up in a car, everybody else does so automatically, but getting that one person to belt up is the focus.

Motorcycle testing is being monitored to ensure that the risk is appropriate, balanced against the need to show competence. The distance that has to be travelled is an issue, but we are getting that down because the number of testing venues is increasing all the time. I have had several meetings with parliamentary colleagues and their constituents, and we have been able to resolve some of these issues. That puts pressure on the DSA to do its best. It is doing its best, and it is still bearing down on the question of ensuring that as many centres are available as possible. It has also been changing how driving tests are booked, because that has been a factor in reducing the availability of some test centres. Professional instructors are block-booking and then cancelling within three days. They do not get a penalty because they are cancelling within the appropriate time, but no one else can take the bookings because their use has not been planned. We are looking at all such issues.

I have seen the suggestion for cyclists from the Mayor. As a cyclist, I am interested, and as a Minister, I and my colleagues look at all the submissions that come in during a consultation. We shall come forward with responses in due course. Transport for London is trialling motorcycles in bus lanes for 18 months, in line with what many other local authorities have done. We shall look at the evidence with interest in due course. I was comfortable with getting TfL into line—the Mayor made the right decision there—and that is the advice we have been giving London for some time.

Finally, I turn to intelligent speed adaptation—another issue on which we run a big risk of being attacked by the lobby that thinks the Government are anti-motoring. We are not, and the other main parties are not anti-motoring. We are pro-road safety, and if we can improve road safety through different initiatives, we would do that. If a tiny minority of people in the motoring community or fraternity—whom I would loosely call the "petrolheads"—accuse us of being anti-motoring, I would accuse them of being anti-road safety. Intelligent speed adaptation could be a powerful tool. I have been in a TfL car and seen ISA working, on a voluntary and on a compulsory basis. The voluntary ISA looks simple and useful as a tool for giving people information. It can use the global positioning system to determine the speed limit in a given area, and a warning device says whether people are going over the speed limit. It will be a tool that those who sell cars can use, just as they are starting to get to grips with other safety devices. They can use them to sell to car buyers, particularly parents buying a first car for a young son or daughter who has just passed their test. The latest technology such as stability control and ABS costs no more than £500. A parent will spend that in order to know that their child, who does not have a lot of experience behind the wheel, has all the technological advances to help keep that car on the road if they have to brake fiercely and need protection.

The technology is improving and motor manufacturers and traders are learning more and starting to promote safe cars, just as they are learning about environmental issues and promoting green cars. They will use ISA to sell vehicles, particularly to parents. The top end of the market now automatically carries such features, which will move down through the rest of the market. European legislation will force manufacturers and traders to do that by the middle of the next decade in any case, so why should they not jump ahead of the game and introduce them earlier?

As I said at the outset of the debate and in beginning my closing remarks, in my view the issue is not party political, but there are disagreements and differences of opinion about how we can improve the situation. We have all contributed, along with all the people on the front line out there, who are doing the real, hard work of making sure that people are protected as best as possible. We shall continue to debate the issues and to come up with the best possible solutions.

Question put and agreed to.

4.9 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 9 June 2009

[CHRISTOPHER FRASER *in the Chair*]

Manufacturing and Employment

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr. McAvoy.)*

9.30 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): It is good to see that you are the Chairman of the day, Mr. Fraser, and may I add that I am disappointed that you will be retiring?

We are pleased to be having this important debate. Manufacturing is important to our economy and to the UK, and Governments past and present have not given it their true support in the way that I would have liked. There is support, but we must recognise the importance of manufacturing. I should like to talk about what is being done in the automotive sector. We can see the importance of the subject by the fact that so many Members from all sides of the House have taken the trouble to turn up at 9.30 am—I say that for the benefit of those outside who perhaps do not realise that politicians start that little bit earlier than they see on television.

The debate is about what is happening and some of the big issues. Only yesterday, we had the devastating news of LDV vans when only a fortnight ago we thought that there was great hope for the company. There was talk of a Malaysian company and the Government giving £5 million to tide it over, and we thought that everything was in place to ensure that LDV manufacturing in the UK could continue. Unfortunately, what we thought was in place fell apart because of the banks, which did not put the money in.

We have potentially lost 850 jobs in LDV, and probably 4,000 from the supply chain for LDV. The situation has an impact not only on Birmingham, but on other parts of the country in that supply chain. All the parts for LDV vans go through Multipart, which is a huge logistics supply chain company based in Chorley. It is an excellent company and it has the contract for LDV vans. There is a knock-on effect for each constituency. Team Leyland International is also based in Chorley. It is the original exporter and continues to export LDV vans—the company gets LDV vans into places such as Nepal for the British Army. The effect is much greater than people see in the headlines of a newspaper or regional programme. We must consider the depth of the impact that the LDV vans situation will have on the economy and on people's livelihoods and jobs.

I would have thought that it is now time for the Government to step in and rescue LDV vans. It seems pretty obscene to me that we can see the Mercedes-Benz badge on police van after police van parked outside in the square. That is a shame and a tragedy. Do we think that we will see a British-built van in Germany? Not on your nelly! We will also not see them in Italy, France or Spain. Why do we see that here? What playing field do those countries play on that we do not? We should be ensuring that the police want to buy British to support British taxpayers and British jobs. The same goes for the ambulance service, which uses Renault or Mercedes vehicles, and the Highways Agency, which uses Mitsubishi vehicles, which are not even built in Europe.

There is something seriously wrong, is there not? Our procurement is a nonsense. On the one hand, we spend millions saying how good British industry is and, "Come and buy from us," yet at the same time, our Government do not back our jobs. What is going wrong? Why spend millions promoting British manufacturing and then not buy the products? The best advert for British products is to be seen using them. What car will the Minister ride home in tonight? Is it British built? Has it got a British component? I have not checked, but I suspect that it is a Prius or a Honda.

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Kevin Brennan): I know that it is unusual to intervene at this point, but I can tell my hon. Friend that it is a Vauxhall Vectra.

Mr. Hoyle: May I say congratulations and well done? The Minister needs a preservation order on him! He must be listed! He is fairly unique in the House. At least there is a conscience at work.

The fact is that most of the Minister's colleagues—I hope that he will spread the word—use the Toyota Prius. There is nothing wrong with the Prius, except that it does not involve British jobs or components, and it is shipped all the way here, so it has a bigger carbon footprint than the Minister's car, which comes from down the road.

I am not anti-Toyota, which has a plant in the UK—far from it—but I say this to Ministers: they should ride round in a British-built Aventis. Otherwise, let us have the big conversation and ask Toyota, "Why aren't you building hybrid cars in the UK?" Manufacturing in the UK is very important to us. Australia, with 16 million people, can say, "Build here and we'll buy your vehicles; don't build here and we won't." We should be following that example. There are 60 million people in this country and we are one of the biggest car-owning countries in the world. We should lean on Toyota—and Honda—and say, "Do the right thing and build those cars here."

Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is a very distinguished member of the Select Committee on Business and Enterprise, which I have the privilege to chair. The theme that he is pursuing is familiar—he has pursued it with Ministers on many occasions and may he continue to do so.

May I encourage the hon. Gentleman to go a bit deeper? Is he aware that the French and German Governments have acted much more decisively than the British Government to support the component supply industry in those markets? It is not just the Toyota and Nissan badges that matter; the stuff that goes into those cars also matters. Our component industry is generally strong, but at present it is threatened, and more decisive action is being taken elsewhere to support component industries.

Mr. Hoyle: How could I disagree with the Chairman of our Committee? He is a great man, and I accept the knowledge that he displays. Supporting and creating jobs in the supply chain is an important factor. However,

[Mr. Hoyle]

we do not want to end up with a kit factory. We have to go deeper. We should be drilling down to find out where we can create jobs.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has brought this subject to the House. He has the vast majority of British people on his side, but they, like us, know that European competition rules are the problem. In procurement, the British Government must follow European rules, which they seem to do to the letter. Other countries in Europe do not do so to quite the same extent. That is one of the problems.

Mr. Hoyle: I cannot disagree. This country is unique in its gold-plating—it is absolutely gold-plated all the way through. As I said, we are on a different playing field from the rest of Europe. Toyota vehicles are produced in Japan, where European competition rules do not apply. Ministers ought to question their own judgment and have the guts to stand up for British industry—the Minister is rightly standing up for British industry and Ellesmere Port by using a Vauxhall. We want to see more backbone and Ministers saying, "I don't want a car that's been shipped round the world with a bigger carbon footprint. I want one that's built in the UK. What's good for France is good for the UK." That is the kind of motivation that we want.

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): I would be cautious about focusing entirely on Toyota. It has a plant in south Derbyshire that employs many people in my constituency, and it has a good reputation as an employer. Surprisingly, the highest proportion of manufacturing jobs as a proportion of the economy is not in the great west midlands or the north-west, but in the east midlands, where 15 per cent. of our GDP is linked to manufacturing—Toyota is a part of that.

Mr. Hoyle: I do not disagree. My hon. Friend listens carefully, so he will have heard that I am asking Toyota to consider building in the UK as it did for Australia. I was also saying that Ministers should be buying the Toyota Aventis, which is built in the east midlands. It is an excellent car—it is good on economy and good for the environment. Buying cars that are built in the UK is surely better for the jobs that my hon. Friend wants to create and support in his constituency and the east midlands region. We should buy the cars that are built here rather than the cars that are built in Japan with no British parts and involving no British jobs, which are shipped around the world and which are not good for the environment. That is what I am saying.

David Taylor: The car components industry, which feeds Toyota and others, is a significant employer in North-West Leicestershire. About 20 per cent. of 18 to 24-year-olds were employed in manufacturing in 1997. That figure has more than halved over the past 10 years, and a generation of young people who feel frozen out of the job market are now showing an interest in the politics of the far right. That is one of the lessons that we learned last Thursday.

Mr. Hoyle: I cannot disagree. There is a big question for all parties when people are driven to the fringes in voting. I will not go into that political issue, but I agree that it involves jobs. We must tune in to people and ensure that they have opportunities. They must not be frozen out, or frustration will result. I agree totally.

We have touched on the importance of LDV vans. It is not too late. Yes, people are being made redundant as we speak, but there is a mothballed factory for which there is still hope and opportunity, because it has invested heavily in electric vehicles. Some LDV vans are being trialled by a leading supermarket. LDV is a world leader. If it were in France or Germany, would those countries allow it to close? No. They would put in investment to drive it forward, because the future is in electric vehicles. We should be investing to save the company. That is where we should start.

It is bad news. Household names such as Jaguar and Vauxhall, which I thank the Minister for mentioning, as well as other, smaller manufacturing companies are facing an uncertain future. There is good news out there—the market is experiencing a bit of an upturn—but the credit crunch is beginning to ripple far beyond the financial sector, where it started, and is having a devastating effect on manufacturing. It has exposed our overdependence on financial services and highlighted the need to restructure our economy for the future. We need a vibrant manufacturing base. It is essential for the prosperity of the UK economy. We must not make the same mistakes that were made in the past.

Manufacturing matters, not only to the 3 million people that it employs directly but to the further 2.4 million employed indirectly in supply chains and related services, as the hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) rightly said. We must look after the components sector and protect it better. Manufacturing helps the wider economy. Many of our towns, cities and communities rely on it as their main economic driver, and 50 per cent. of our exports come from the manufacturing sector.

These are difficult times for manufacturing. The pressure of operating in an ever-increasing global economy has been compounded by the global recession. Most notably, the automotive sector has been severely affected since 1997. More than 1 million manufacturing jobs have disappeared, and that trend is due to continue to the end of the year.

Bob Spink: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that small and medium-sized enterprises are a most important sector within manufacturing. They generate sustainable jobs and new enterprises. The problem for SMEs is that regulations affect them disproportionately, because they do not have the resources that big companies have to deal with them. I welcome the Government's procurement plan—they are leading us out of recession—but it is not available in small bites that SMEs can access. The Government need to target their procurement at SMEs as well as big companies.

Mr. Hoyle: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. Procurement contracts could be broken down into smaller pieces, which would allow SMEs to bid for them. That is why we should have a procurement Minister, not just in defence but across all Departments, to ensure that everybody is aware of procurement contracts and that people are helped to win them rather than being omitted

because they are too small or do not have the capability. It is about encouragement, help and support. The appointment of a procurement Minister could make a difference for UK jobs.

Peter Luff: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. I am sure that he would not want to leave the House with the impression that manufacturing in this country is anything other than thriving in many respects. We have world-class technology in many sectors, including aerospace, automobiles, pharmaceuticals and so on. We are the sixth-largest manufacturing nation in the world. Yes, the sector faces problems at present, and it is wonderful that he is highlighting them, but equally, this is a fantastic opportunity for what remains a successful manufacturing base in this country.

Mr. Hoyle: I do not disagree. As I go on, I will mention some of the benefits. The hon. Gentleman is anticipating what I am going to say. I am talking about the downside, but I also want to talk about the pluses. We should build on what we do best.

Recently, the Engineering Employers Federation raised its job loss forecast for 2009 to 188,000. If those jobs are lost, skills will be gone for ever as workers struggle to re-enter the labour market. We must face up to that problem as well.

When we talk about the automotive industry, people often think exclusively of cars. However, I am keen to highlight the needs of all vehicle manufacturers, particularly Leyland Trucks, which employs many of my constituents. It is a world leader and the last major truck manufacturer in the UK. It meets the environmental targets that we expect of major truck manufacturing. It makes the trucks that we want on our roads. It needs support. The company has invested heavily in meeting environmental needs and reducing emissions from its trucks, but it is struggling. It is still building trucks, but it has had to reduce its work force significantly, and staff are working on reduced hours. Now is the time for the Government to step in. The Government can do a lot, perhaps through a short-time working subsidy to ensure that Leyland Trucks retains its skilled labour and can compete when the market improves. We do not want the company to wither on the vine.

It comes back around. Who has been given the contract for our new Army trucks? Has it been given to Leyland Trucks? No, it has gone to MAN, in Germany. A lot of promises were made. MAN said, "We own ERF in Cheshire now, so we'll bid for the Army contract." What has MAN done? It has closed ERF. I understand that ERF now has a little garage based in Stafford. That is its footprint. The vehicles will be built in Germany and shipped over. It is that sort of nonsense that we must overcome. It is no different from Army uniforms being made in China and shipped back here. That is not about European competition; it is about bad judgment.

Leyland Trucks is important, and we could do much more for it. We have given tax advantages to the car industry—I will mention more about that—but we need to do something for manufacturers of vans and larger vehicles to help them through the recession. Why are we not giving tax breaks up front and incentives to sell trucks? Fleet buyers will always be there. Royal Mail will be there for ever and a day. No one will ever make money on Royal Mail, but they can make money on small buyers—the people who drive one, two, three or four wagons. Those are the people who matter. Helping the manufacturers would help them, because new vehicles would give them better efficiency, but it would also keep jobs and skills in place. That is what we need to support. Will my hon. Friend the Minister consider it? We have done a good job on the car scrappage scheme, but we need to do something for trucks that will bring benefit. I hope that he will take that on board. Leyland Trucks is important.

During the economic downturn, we have witnessed a 60 per cent. fall in production, which highlights the huge impact of the financial crisis on our vehicle manufacturing sector. We accept that we cannot compete on price and stoop to allowing lower-skilled jobs to move to low-paid economies, but it is worrying that highly skilled and well-paid jobs are now going abroad at a similar rate. We need urgently to reassess our policy if we want manufacturing to survive. We need to end our passive manufacturing policy and the notion that factory closures do not matter. They matter, particularly to those who lose out and are forced to enter low-paid work as a result of closures.

We cannot afford to let manufacturing wither away. Now more than ever, the Government must prioritise support and invest in our manufacturing base to meet today's challenges and ensure that we are best placed to grasp the opportunities of tomorrow. The Government document, "Building Britain's future: new industry, new jobs", offers a platform for doing so. It points to an encouraging shift in industrial policy.

Coupled with that, Government initiatives such as the car scrappage scheme are having an impact and helping to kick-start demand in the automotive sector. That is welcome but it is aimed mainly at small cars. We need encouragement to buy family cars. Families need bigger cars. People cannot tow a caravan with a Nissan Micra, or fit three kids, two adults and a dog inside. We build good family cars, such as the Toyota Aventis. The powertrain of the Mondeo, including the engine and the gearbox, comes from the UK. Incentives to sell more of those vehicles would be a big bonus, because Ford employs thousands of people in the UK.

The car scrappage scheme could be extended. We do not want to fall off a cliff at the end of the 12 months. We must manage the end of the scheme and give other incentives. We must be imaginative in coming up with ideas. I welcome the scrappage scheme, which is working well and making things better. However, my challenge to the Minister is that we can do more.

David Taylor: Does my hon. Friend share the caution of many environmental and economic campaigners over the scrappage scheme? Six of every seven cars bought in this country are imported, which will restrict the impact of the scheme on the UK economy. Could the scheme be given a new direction at the end of the period that the Chancellor has put in place?

Mr. Hoyle: That is a worry. However, other jobs are created on the back of the scheme, for example in the dealer network and the supply chain for spares. The problem is that the Mondeo is classed as an imported vehicle, even though the powertrain, and therefore most of the car, is produced through UK manufacturing. It is easy to state a figure for vehicles that come from abroad,

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but, as I have said, there is a difference between a Mondeo and a Prius. The Mondeo's powertrain comes from the UK, whereas the Prius contains nothing from the UK. We must get that balance right. If there is a way to support British car manufacturing, I am happy to look at it. However, we come back to the point about European rules. We can do more, but we should not forget that many cars from abroad have content from the UK, and many do not.

The absence of a comprehensive cross-govérnmental manufacturing strategy puts at risk our ability to meet today's demands and to enable future growth. We need a jobs summit that brings together the Government and all social partners to set out a strategy. A clear direction for UK manufacturing that centres on investment, infrastructure and the work force must be agreed. There should be regional job summits where the Secretary of State brings regional manufacturers together and listens to what they say. Those manufacturers must work together to ensure that they have a future. They must state their needs and what they want to see from Government, rather than be told what is good for them, which we are very good at. The challenge is to listen to them and to work together. It is important that there is a clear direction centred on investment.

The Government, business and trade unions must work together if manufacturing is to survive. The unions must play a role in the growth of this country, as they are the best lobbyers for procurement contracts. They led the lobbying on behalf of BAE Systems on the Typhoon, the joint strike fighter and submarines. They do a great job of ensuring that UK jobs survive. We want to see a new practice of working together and do not want to return to the problems of the '70s. New social partnerships are being built in which the unions work hand in hand with companies for the betterment of UK manufacturing.

Who would have thought that Lord Digby Jones would be seen hand in hand with Unite leaders, marching for jobs? Who would have thought it? The bastion of self-enterprise—*[Interruption.]* I did say "bastion"—the last bastion. Many may wish to think differently of Digby, but I know that his parents were married. He has become a champion of British jobs and of working with the trade unions. Nobody would have dreamt of seeing a march for jobs in Birmingham with Digby and Unite trade union leaders at the front. I welcome that and look forward to his application card coming through. That demonstrates the change we have seen and suggests what will happen in future.

A new approach to manufacturing is needed. We must not abandon the view that the market has the answers. It does not have all of them, but it has some. Although we do not like to use the word, we have seen intervention in the banking and car industries. It does not have to be a dirty word that we turn our noses up at. Intervention is important and the market matters—we must bring the two things together. If we do not, within 20 years, countries like China and India will make everything we use. Our European counterparts recognise that they cannot have a successful economy without a robust manufacturing base and have acted quickly to defend it. The UK, too, must adopt a more active industrial policy and should not be afraid to intervene to support and protect jobs, and to incentivise investment where appropriate. The state should step in to provide the necessary support for manufacturing companies. It is not acceptable to stand by and watch skilled jobs and companies such as LDV go to the wall.

We must look at new ways of working that are used in Europe and the United States. Many problems in the automotive industry are shared. In the global market, we must explore and work together where possible, for example to invest in the production of more environmentally friendly vehicles, to which the Government are committed. It is right to have long-term policies on investing in greener vehicles, but we must not miss out on the short-term policies that are needed.

I congratulate the Government on working with Jaguar Land Rover. It is important that such major companies continue and there can be no excuses if they do not. The Government were right to intervene to tackle the financial crisis and should not hesitate in acting to support other jobs. Such action benefits business, workers, the economy and the taxpayer.

The Government could adopt a number of measures to help manufacturing contend better with the downturn. More direct support is needed to protect jobs. One option is a time-limited wage subsidy targeted at keeping viable businesses open. Short-time working and temporary lay-offs are now a reality. In some cases, they are a stepping-stone to redundancy. For example, workers at Leyland Trucks are being forced to accept short-time working because of the downturn in the orders for vehicles. Each week, more businesses are forced to do the same. Such companies and their workers deserve our support.

A time-limited wage subsidy scheme should be introduced with sufficient safeguards to ensure that only firms directly affected by the recession qualify and to avoid dead weight. It could bring significant benefits such as employers avoiding immediate redundancies and retaining essential staff and skills. If linked to training, it could be a long-term work force investment. Surely it makes more sense to invest in people in the work force, rather than in the jobcentre. Rather than subsidising people to be unemployed, we should subsidise them to keep their jobs.

Bob Spink: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to build for the future of the manufacturing sector, there must be more genuine, traditional, workplace apprenticeships? Will he congratulate the Government on developing more apprenticeships and press them to develop more traditional, work-based, manufacturing apprenticeships? That is the future.

Mr. Hoyle: I am happy to join in that praise for the Government's action on what I call traditional, real apprenticeships. I cannot thank the Government enough. Apprenticeships are part of what we need for the future, but are no good if we allow the companies to disappear. We must ensure that the companies are there so that we can provide the long-term jobs that apprentices and the country require.

The TUC estimates that at a cost of about £1.2 billion, we could save 600,000 workers each year through a short-time working subsidy. We have found billions to bail out the bankers, so we can do the same for hard-working people in manufacturing. The banks are now

paying that money back, and we should reinvest it in manufacturing so that we benefit even more in the longer term. A short-time working subsidy would be a quick and effective way of targeting support at the struggling employers providing financial support to employees across the UK. Europe has already recognised the benefits of such schemes, which have been introduced in Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Italy. Closer to home, the Welsh Assembly has introduced a wage subsidy called ProAct, which took only two months to become operational at the beginning of the year and is now benefiting many businesses and workers across Wales—we can learn something from a small country such as Wales.

The proposal to introduce a short-time working subsidy is supported by business leaders such as the Federation of Small Businesses, and organisations such as Corus, JCB and many others. The trade unions also fully support it. As I have said, it is better to pay to keep people in work than to pay them to attend a jobcentre. What are we otherwise going to do with them? Will we train them to do the jobs for which they already have the skills? That is what we seem to do. It makes sense to provide that support, because it helps people to keep their dignity and their ability to pay the mortgage and it stops family break-ups. That alone would bring a major benefit to the Government. It must be a priority to keep viable businesses open and to protect jobs if we are to come out of the recession in a stronger position. If we fail to do so, there is a danger that we could lose many much-needed skills.

I want to discuss workers' rights. The Government have rightly made progress on introducing family-friendly policies, but those policies benefit people only if they have jobs, so we need to make those things work together. We have not been so bold in other areas, and the UK has a poor record, in comparison with other European countries, on protecting workers who face redundancy. It is worrying that General Motors Europe has admitted that it is easier to sack British workers because of the flexible labour market. Increasingly, when multinationals consider downsizing and shedding jobs, they see British workers as the easy option. We need to reconsider these matters, as it is scandalous that UK workers are among the cheapest to sack. We need a level playing field, and I urge the Government to act to give British workers the same protection as their European counterparts. This is not about favours; it is about fairness.

Linked to all that, we need further incentives to support companies that invest in our manufacturing sector. We could do that by giving better tax incentives or by demanding the repayment of grants, so that we would help them on one hand, but they would have to pay back with penalties. We would have to include penalties because some people want to come in, make a quick buck and disappear. Companies must decide which is the best option for them: is it to repay the advantage they have had in order to move quickly somewhere offshore?

We need to send the message that Britain is the best place to invest, and we can do that. We have the best skills and the best work force, and we make the best products in the world. We are world leaders in areas such as pharmaceuticals and aerospace, and we have a great skills base in the north-west, particularly in Lancashire. There are no better skills than those we have in aerospace in Lancashire. When we look at BAE Systems and at what flies out of there, we see that those skills and the research and development that go into that manufacturing base are second to none. The Americans look at us with envy, and rightly so, as we are building the best aircraft in the world.

I would like all that skill, knowledge and know-how to be linked with technology transfer, as that is where we miss out. We invest in military aircraft that are the best in the world, but we need a spin-off from that investment to create jobs in the civil sector. People always ask, what good is the military? It is good when it protects us, but I want to be able to say that it goes much further than that. I want to say, "Look at what we've created by transfer to the automotive industry and other industries such as shipbuilding, with submarines." There must be skills that we can transfer across to our other UK manufacturing bases. We have put in the research, development and investment, but we do not hear about technology transfer. When a space shuttle is put into space, we hear about the spin-offs and other jobs being created through that investment. We need to do the same and to recognise what we could gain from such major investment. I repeat that we are still the world leader in pharmaceuticals. We need to go forward with that kind of blue chip company, and we need to send the message that Britain is the best place to invest and do business.

Warm words from the Government in support of manufacturing are commendable, but they need to be matched by direct action. The Government have rightly embarked on record investment in our schools, hospitals and transport infrastructure, but that investment must be matched by a policy that prioritises British manufacturing, thus protecting British jobs. We invest in our railways, but we have trains that are built in Japan and other rolling stock that is built in Spain. Why is that continuing? Does the Minister think that Japan or Spain would let us export trains to them? The answer is no, they would not. When we are making all that investment with taxpayers' money, we must consider how to use it to help British jobs. We have missed a trick which we must not miss in the future. The Government spend more than £120 billion a year on buying manufactured goods, so the introduction of such measures would make a real difference to our manufacturing sector. For a start, why should not all the vehicles used by the Government and the public sector be made in Britain? What about Building Schools for the Future and Sure Start children's centres? Why should the desks and chairs that our children use in the classroom not be made in Britain? I could go on and on about how much more we could do. As I have said, British uniforms could be made in Chorley. Public infrastructure projects such as Crossrail and the 2012 Olympics should always prioritise in favour of British companies and British jobs, and should make sure that the steelwork, materials and everything else are from the UK.

We also need to invest more in skills and training if we are to reinvigorate the manufacturing sector. The Leitch report highlighted the importance of investing in skills and workers. The planned investment initiatives will go only so far, and we need to go further if we wish to remain at the cutting edge of manufacturing. We need to address this issue urgently, as it cannot be right that companies such as Rolls Royce have to recruit from

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abroad to fill the skills gap. We ought to recognise that problem immediately and put it right. I welcome the increasing number of apprenticeships and I commend the work of companies such as BAE Systems, which has invested significant resources in such apprenticeship schemes and in the company's future. One has only to look at its graduate and apprenticeship scheme in Barrow, which has benefited more than 600 people. About 13 per cent. of its Submarine Solutions work force has come through that scheme, proving that investment quickly brings rewards.

Train to Gain is also making a difference, but we must go further. We need to be bold and radical in offering training and development opportunities for those who are already in work to upskill and give them the diversity to meet the change in demand for skills. However, the Government cannot do that alone. Employers need to work together on that, but there should be greater incentives, particularly for small and medium-sized companies to invest in their work forces.

We will face challenges in future, but we must not shy away from them. Our manufacturing is something that I can be proud of, that Britain should be proud of, and that the rest of the world is very envious of. We are one of the leading exporters of high-technology products, and our productivity has risen by half since 1997, thereby outpacing Germany and France. The key test is whether we make the necessary investment to build on those achievements or whether we stand by and let our manufacturing industry deteriorate further. We cannot afford to do that. We have been through the painful measures and difficulties of the 1980s, and I know the impact that they had in Lancashire at that time and the problems that we faced. We have come through all that, and we must never return to it by doing nothing. This is not a political point: doing nothing would have taken us from recession into a depression, and that is why we were right to invest. We must not shy away from investment, although there will be critics. Fruit is now beginning to appear on the tree and it will not be long before we can pick it, so it benefits the Government. We must acknowledge when they get things right, and we should not be ashamed of what we have done. I repeat that doing nothing is not the way forward, and that we would have been in a depression if we had done nothing.

The weakness of the economy is dependent on the financial sector, as I said earlier. With a strong manufacturing base, we can secure continued economic growth and stability and help to support workers and return our economy to a position of even greater strength. I hope that we can expand on the measures that we have taken, and that they can grow. However, it is not all doom and gloom—there is good news. I have a company called Porter Lancastrian in my area. People might ask who they are: they produce bar products, but the brewing industry is suffering and pub closures are coming. However, Porter Lancastrian diversified, and now produces waterproof television screens for the fanciest hotels around the world; so that when people sit in the bath or have a shower, they can watch television. Waterproof televisions are going a bomb and they came out of Chorley. That is fantastic news—I do not think that MPs have claimed them on their expenses yet.

It is important to have initiatives to deal with these issues. Such initiatives should be about diversifying and creating new jobs. That is what we are good at in the UK. Providing a bit of help and support and bringing people together can make a real difference. I am pleased that we have been allowed to have today's debate. It will help to inform policy development and implementation, and the vision set out in the "New Industry, New Jobs" document. That document is important and manufacturing is important. Thank you, Mr. Fraser, for your patience. I also thank other hon. Members for turning up.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that I intend to commence the wind-ups at 10.30 am and that there are at least two Members who would like to speak.

10.10 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I note the desire of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd) to speak and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), who put the case admirably. I am delighted to speak under your chairmanship, Mr. Fraser.

I shall concentrate on the key issue of the wage contribution, subsidy or whatever we want to call it. It might surprise people to know that Stroud is a manufacturing centre. Many people think that it is an area of agriculture, green hills and tourism. In fact, a disproportionate number of people—more than the national average and certainly the highest number in Gloucestershire—work in manufacturing, particularly engineering.

Our firms are mainly automotive or in the automotive chain—although some are aerospace—and they are experiencing some difficulties at the moment. The aerospace sector has, of course, lagged behind other sectors in terms of the recession, but, nevertheless, it faces some difficulties. I have been to all my major firms—Renishaws, Delphi, SKF, Lister-Petters and a smaller company called Deutz. In addition, I am in Cologne next week to try to fight to retain 30 jobs, which I think we can do if the parent company allows its subsidiary in Dursley to go it alone and work with Lister-Petters, which was the original company. That would provide an answer, and it is my duty to work towards such a solution. It is not all bad news: an ABB plant in my constituency is doing very well, because it is based in the water and power industries. The way in which ABB locks into those industries means that it is doing relatively well.

On wage subsidy and wage contribution, I must compliment the Government. Two of the firms that I have mentioned—Delphi and Renishaws—have laid off a large number of people. For Renishaws, that is unheralded. That company is a state-of-the-art probe manufacturer under the chairmanship of Sir David McMurtry, who is one of the stars of Britain and British industry. However, between December and January, Renishaws hit a wall because of what happened to demand for machine tools, of which probes are a key element. As well as the lay-offs, people have "volunteered" to go on short-time working to keep their jobs. However, accordingly, they will take the pain of the loss of money and the sacrifice that comes with that.

I went to see both Delphi and Renishaws early in the new year when they hit these problems. We agreed collectively that when people are on short-time working, their time can be used meaningfully to boost their skill level and that we should ensure that people can do the training that they would love to do but that they are normally too busy to contemplate. I pay due regard to a number of Government agencies that have been key to those discussions, such as the South West of England Development Agency, the Learning and Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus, Gloucestershire First—our local development agency—and Gloucestershire Training Group Limited, which will undertake the training provision. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley has said, the trade union, Unite, has also been crucial in encouraging its members to go along with the training.

Using Train to Gain, we have put training packages in place so that slack time can be taken up and that people can be usefully employed. There are two reasons why we have done that. First, as I have said, it is important for people to build up their skill level. Secondly, when we get out of recession, we have to be absolutely tooled-up, skilled-up and personed-up, because otherwise our competitors in Europe will take the work. The two firms that I am talking about are Renishaws and Delphi. Delphi has a huge order book going forward, but, of course, no one is taking up those orders at the moment. Renishaws is much more of a just-in-time business, but, again, it will be back because it is the world's leading manufacturer of highly skilled probes. We have a future; those firms have a future; however, we have got to get to that future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley has said, I commend the paper produced jointly by the Federation of Small Businesses and the TUC. I shall not discuss that document in detail, because I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central wants to speak. However, it is a very pertinent paper, which also has the benefit of being short, and it makes the point that such training schemes mean that firms are keeping people on their books. Of course, firms have the means to do so, because employment schemes involve a levy on companies, so that money is available to allow companies to keep people on the books while the state pays them in times of downturn. I am not suggesting that we go along all the way with that, because it is rather quaint to pay people to lie on the beach for three months at a time. I would much rather people were working and being trained when they are not working, so that they are appropriately skilled for when they come back.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley has said, if we consider Wales, such schemes are not unique in our country. The Minister might have an interesting point of view on this because, under the ProAct strategy, such schemes are taking place in Wales, where people are being paid wage contributions to undertake training. Wales has led the way on that and the rest of the United Kingdom must follow.

Of course, smaller companies can already pay a training subsidy under Train to Gain. Again, that is nothing new. During the 1970s, to which people sometimes hark back, there was a temporary employment subsidy. Such schemes are nothing new; we have done it before and we must do it again. Why? Well, the alternative is to lay people off, which will cost. I know that there is a cost associated with such training schemes—the figure of £1.2 billion has been bandied around, which is the figure in the FSB and TUC paper—but it is not an absolute cost because people would go on to jobseeker's allowance and draw down all sorts of other benefits. Therefore, I would like the Government to cost such schemes. I know that I am arguing with my hon. Friend on this, but I would, at least initially, limit such schemes to the automotive industry, and then see how long the recession lasts. This is a short-term measure. We are not talking about it being indefinite because, of course, we hope that the recession will not be indefinite. It is a short-term measure, but, nevertheless, we need to take it.

I have some specific questions for my hon. Friend the Minister. I am eternally grateful for the Delphi-Renishaws package being put together, but the ghost in the room—if I can put it that way—that has not been dealt with is the need for a wage contribution. The Delphi-Renishaws scheme is taking place on a per person basis, and one issue is the upfront costs of the awarding body. Those costs should be removed or at least scaled down, because there will potentially be—we would like to see this—at least 300, 400 or perhaps even more workers undertaking the upskilling to get national vocational qualification levels that they have not previously managed to achieve.

Secondly, there is the question of what happens when someone drops out of the scheme. At present, the full cost is borne by the company. As that is something that companies in difficulty always worry about, we hope that there will be some flexibility so that the company does not have to bear the full cost of people leaving, for whatever reason, whether it is another job, family illness or so on.

Thirdly, apprentices are key to the scheme. Both companies have committed themselves to taking apprentices this year and next year, because they feel that that is the future. At present, the use of European social funding for those under 18 is not allowed, so we wish to have flexibility to include under-18s.

Finally, setting up such schemes is expensive; it requires a big budget. We want some clarity that they can continue in the future, because, whatever we do to begin with, we will want to roll it out. I would like other firms to join in and follow that model, which is exciting, innovative and absolutely right. Those are my specific questions.

In conclusion, I think that what we are trying to do in my constituency is absolutely right, but we do not want to be hung on or hamstrung by the question of whether a contribution will be paid. There is a matter of justice: if the state is asking people to use their time and money to undertake such a scheme, the least it can do is make a contribution as they do so. We will get a benefit, as our firms will be even more competitive when they come out of the recession.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister hears my earnest pleas. I am grateful to the Government for putting enormous resources into supporting employment. I know that the scheme is a pioneer project, a pilot—it is pushing forward the boundaries—but, as I have said, the problem is not new. If we can crack this, other parts of the country and other companies can learn from us, but we need clarity about whether a wage contribution for the automotive industry is a possibility, albeit for a short period of time, because it would help everybody. We will push on with our plans regardless, but we really need that back-up.

10.22 am

Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central) (Lab): In the little time that is available, I wish to make several brief points. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), who, as ever, has picked up issues that really matter to our constituents.

My hon. Friend probably agrees that we need to draw a careful distinction between saying that the Government ought to be active in their policy on employment and encouraging the industrial and manufacturing base, which can involve the proper use of Government procurement to ensure that British firms are advantaged, and saying that we ought to move to some kind of economic protectionism. I am not a natural free-marketer, but, nevertheless, we are a trading economy. My hon. Friend gave examples of British companies that successfully manufacture all over the world—those companies do not necessarily assemble cars in the end, but they manufacture the parts that go into them. We cannot take part in a process that involves cutting off our nose to spite our face, which would happen if we got the balance wrong. There is nothing inconsistent about adopting the kind of policies that are adopted by some of our European neighbours to support home industries. We do not have to cross the boundary into the wrong kind of protectionism.

Mr. Hoyle: I totally agree. This is about using the same rules as our European counterparts. In the case of Japan, does my hon. Friend think that a Japanese Minister would ride around in a British-built car? The answer is no, because the Japanese Government have a policy that ensures that that does not happen. The rules should be the same for all of us.

Tony Lloyd: We all agree with that. We want the rules to be used judiciously and carefully to the advantage of our employment and manufacturing base.

The Government must look at the role of Government procurement. I do not say that unkindly, but procurement over the years by all Governments has perhaps not shown Britain at its best. The civil service has not always known best how to work in partnership with manufacturing. That might seem like a plea for manufacturers. It is sometimes said that we have feather-bedded manufacturers in the past. We have allowed poor management to get away with an approach that allows them to become lazy and not as cutting edge as they ought to be. The Government ought to be using their purchasing power to promote the dynamic cutting edge. They should ensure that those who provide goods and services to them are at the forefront of global manufacturing.

I give the example—it is an important one—of BAE Systems. There is no doubt that in the past it got away with ridiculous prices, ridiculously slow delivery times and so on. The overly cosy relationship with previous Governments was not in the interests of BAE Systems or our employment and manufacturing base. Such things are now changing. There is a much tougher view in the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform about the procurement process, but we need to refine it to ensure that there is value for money and that the Government play a part in driving an industrial policy that leads to success.

I support my hon. Friends the Members for Chorley and for Stroud (Mr. Drew) in their plea for a proper look at a judicious use of employment subsidies in parts of industry. The Government rightly recognised that the importance of the banking system was not in whether individual banks succeeded or otherwise but in the fact that if the system had collapsed, knock-on effects would have spread throughout the whole of the UK's services and manufacturing economy. What the Government did was high risk but absolutely right, which is now being proven.

The argument for support for LDV, for example, is similar. The issue concerns not only LDV, but the supply chain that it is involved in and the importance of maintaining that whole infrastructure within our industry. We need to take a strategic view in respect of critical manufacturing firms and ensure that we offer support at this particularly difficult time. Conditions are likely to be difficult for manufacturing for some time to come, so I support the plea made by those who have already spoken.

The future will not be with the large manufacturers of the past but with small and medium-sized enterprises—those little firms that are highly innovative but often feel that they are not supported. I wish to make several points about them. First, while I agree with the arguments about traditional apprenticeships, we have to understand the position of the traditional apprentice in the modern world. A small firm on its own cannot devise a proper apprenticeship structure. There has to be a well-defined structure and access to further education. As I have said to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk), further education is fundamental, and any attack on it would be massively damaging to our manufacturing base. There has to be proper partnership between our education institutions, if we are to offer upskilling to the people who work in our economy.

We should bear in mind that this is not just about apprenticeships but about the reskilling of those who are in work and who already have good skills. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud discussed labour subsidy. The reality is that people with skills who drift out of jobs usually do not come back, and we could lose that skills base in the future.

My final point is about the banking system. Historically, our banking system has seen itself as a great success, but it has always failed this country in the particular area of early innovators—those who do high-technology, quality research and who want to move into production. We are spectacularly bad in dealing with that gap, and many highly qualified, highly competent people leave these shores, often for America and the rest of Europe, to produce their products, because our banking system fails to take a risk at that risky stage of investment, which, nevertheless, is fundamental if we are to see a transition from idea to manufacture.

A firm in my constituency, Liberalto Engines, is currently suffering from that gap. Everyone says that its idea is great and that it will have all the backing that it needs, if it can get its idea into production. The idea is good, and the company knows that the product will work, but moving into prototype and demonstrating production capacity is, of course, risky. The company may fail, but the whole point of the banking system is to take risks and get a price for those risks. At the moment, however, the banking system is not doing that.

That is one thing that the Government could do to ensure that we have a future in respect of the small, highly innovative, advanced technologies that we need.

We have some world-beating industries in this country. I visited a firm in my constituency last week called SSR. It is a training company that works with the media industries, which have produced bands such as the Happy Mondays, New Order and all the other great Manchester bands of the past. It trains people and gives them the skills of the future. There is a blurring of the distinction between services and manufacturing in that area, but those are the industries of the future. Those industries are massively high-tech and massively important for our future, and they are there now. They are successful and they will weather this economic storm and provide us with high-quality employment for the future. The future is good, but it needs a little bit of assistance from the Government now.

10.30 am

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Fraser? May I also congratulate the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on securing this debate and on the excellent way in which he set out the issues, which I will come to in a moment? I also congratulate the hon. Members for Stroud (Mr. Drew) and for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd) on their contributions.

I shall pick up on a couple of points made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Central. First, he made a good point about Government procurement, which is important. Of course, the Office of Government Commerce exists precisely to have an overview of procurement within Government. At the moment, the OGC is largely focused on short-term economic gain in the procurement process, but it is wholly right and reasonable that it should also have a duty to consider its impact in the wider British economy and, as far as it is reasonable, to be helpful to our regions in the way in which it goes about its business.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned further education and, in doing so, put his finger on something important, namely the way in which further education supplies potential skills to industry, particularly SMEs. Coming, as I do, from a background in the hotel and catering industry, one of the biggest difficulties faced by employers over many years has been finding short courses that are relevant for their staff, rather than those designed by the lecturers, with all good intent, that do not deliver the skills that are wanted in the industry. It is important for people to get skills from further education establishments that are fit for purpose in SMEs.

The hon. Member for Chorley underlined the importance of manufacturing. Although I will mention some of the bad things, I want to start by underlining, as he did, its importance to the economy and the success that it has enjoyed. The hon. Gentleman talked about the banks, which I will mention, too, because they are an important part of the mix, and about the success of the aerospace industry. I am sure that one of the firms at the back of his mind is Rolls-Royce. It is fascinating that Rolls-Royce, in my part of the world, is actively looking at marine renewable technology in Pentland firth. We have a real prospect, within a short time, of a number of companies using Rolls-Royce-manufactured kit to produce gigawatts of electricity consistently from a great national resource. We need that kind of technology transfer, and we need more innovation and research and development in that area.

Manufacturing has been in a fairly steady state of decline for a great number of years. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that Governments of both parties have not given it the attention that it deserves. It has dropped from 23.3 per cent. of gross value added within the economy in 1997 to 12.6 per cent. in 2007. This is partly due to the rapid growth of other parts of the economy, particularly the service sector. In real terms, manufacturing over that same decade has grown from £150.2 billion to £157.7 billion. The recession has clearly hit manufacturing output severely: in quarter 1 of 2009, it was down by some 13.1 per cent. over the year. That has obviously had a devastating impact on employment. The trend in jobs in manufacturing has clearly been declining. In 1998, the figure was more than 4 million, but last year it was around 2.6 million, so obviously it has reduced. But that masks part of the good news, which is that industry has been increasing productivity. The productivity of UK industry has been one part of the success story.

Manufacturing industry is having a torrid time at the moment. I want to look briefly at the current causes of that, which are pretty obvious. At the back of it all is the credit crunch, which has caused the recession. On the banks—bank lending and regulation—it is clear that our banking system was insufficiently regulated, particularly with regard to the separation between retail and investment banking. The result of that was a risk in the system that was simply unpriced. The banking crisis has thrown up a deeper-seated problem. With the few friends that I have left in the City, I have to be careful exactly what I say about this, but it seems that we have a structural and cultural problem, which is that the City has been seen as the place to go to make money. The way that the City has operated, with ever more complex financial products chasing each other round and being traded almost for the sake of being traded, means that our financial services industry has been inefficient in its primary task of providing capital for industry.

There is an opportunity in this current crisis to reshape the way in which our financial services industry serves industry generally. Rather than its making complex trades in complex products that turn out to be understood by nobody and of value to very few, we need to get back to the simple task of providing capital for industry to invest for the future. The City needs to go back to being the servant of commerce and stop trying to be the master of speculation. The other effect is that that industry has taken our best brains. Many of our best human resources have gone into financial services, rather than into industry. That culture carries across into the spirit of creating entrepreneurs. Indeed, when I said that I was going into the hotel industry, I saw a brief flash of pained expression in my mother's face because I had not chosen to go to university or take up a profession—although she rapidly reversed her view after I was successful. There is a view in Britain that it is better to go to university or a profession rather than into engineering or manufacturing, or to be an entrepreneur. We really need to tackle that as well.

We need to develop skills, but, as I have said, skills must be appropriate and further and higher education must reflect the needs of industry. We also

[John Thurso]

need management skills. I recently chaired a symposium of the banks in my part of the world to try to connect small companies with their bankers and deal with some of the problems. The interesting thing that the bankers said was, "For goodness' sake, please can we have real-time, proper management information?" The number of SMEs that cannot produce such information is extraordinary.

We need to focus on research and development and investment and we must get across those good ideas that we have produced. We need a method by which we can invest in entrepreneurs. In my part of the world, small bits of money are invested directly in small companies—not granted—by the North Highland Regeneration Fund, which is helping to take small entrepreneurs to the next step. The hon. Member for Manchester, Central put his finger on a point that we need to address.

Looking to the future, I believe that there is a real opportunity. The recession has been devastating, and of that there is no doubt. Unemployment is up, and many companies are barely holding on. I shall not refer to green shoots, but I hope that we are seeing the bottom. Our job must be to create out of that adversity the opportunity to structure the economy for the future.

10.40 am

Mr. Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Fraser. This is the first occasion on which you have chaired a debate in which I have participated, and it is good to see you in your place.

I welcome the Minister to his place on this first occasion in his new role. He is the seventh or eighth Minister whom I have shadowed in the past few years. It is good to see him in his place, and I hope that he will last a little longer than some of his predecessors.

The hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) has a long and distinguished track record in raising important issues concerning manufacturing. He speaks with great passion and verve, and rightly so. He raised a matter that other hon. Members also raised—the role of procurement. The debate has been useful and timely, and I commend all hon. Members who have contributed to it, including the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Peter Luff) and the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd), who was right to consider the way in which procurement can be used without going down the path of protectionism. I share that sentiment.

As all the contributors to the debate said, manufacturing matters. It represents 13 per cent. of our gross domestic product, and generates more than half of our exports. It helps us to pay our way around the world. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire said, last year we were still the sixth-largest manufacturer in the world. We can and should take pride in the quality and strengths of the businesses and the work force in this country. We should not be unduly negative, cautious, careful and aware of the threats and problems, and we should not write manufacturing off.

Clearly, the sector has had problems. One million jobs have been lost during the past dozen years or so, even before the current recession. Since 1997, 10 per cent. of manufacturing businesses have closed. I hear from business and industry about a continuing and rising sense of frustration at the Government's policies as key investments go elsewhere. For example, last year Rolls-Royce chose to locate a new testing facility in Germany, not in Derby. It told me that that was largely because of its frustration at the Government's lack of support. One of its directors said:

"The Germans value manufacturing. There is better productivity and they have a better education system. Government here

"has chosen not to be competitive. Britain has ceased this industry to export its capabilities"

Despite talk from Ministers, it is clear that industry is unimpressed by the Government's inaction.

It has been clear since the fall of Lehman Brothers last September and the collapse of world markets last autumn that urgent action has been needed, particularly in introducing working capital into businesses, so last November my party—the Conservatives—set out a plan for a single, national loan guarantee scheme worth £50 billion for all viable businesses, whatever their size and sector. It was easy to access, clear, and simple to understand, and it would underpin conventional bank lending. That is also why we are committed to cutting the main corporation tax rate from 28p to 25p by simplifying the tax system. We want to reverse the Chancellor's policy of raising the small company corporation tax rate from 20p to 22p. In that way, we can directly help manufacturers, large and small, to invest with confidence for the future. As several hon. Members said, we also need to consider skills in the sector. We are committed to cutting payroll costs for the smallest employers for at least six months. That is the sort of practical action that industry wants, and it is what my party intends to provide.

All of us in politics must be clear about how manufacturing is changing, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Central pointed out. First, we must recognise how globalisation has led to international fragmentation of production. The production of components and parts is spread increasingly not throughout countries, but throughout continents. That creates opportunities and threats. On one hand, global sourcing gives our manufacturers the chance to cut costs and to be competitive. On the other, British firms have no choice but to be globally competitive in their specialisation simply to survive.

The Government can help small manufacturers in the challenge of accessing global value chains—we debated that earlier—especially in emerging high-growth markets. To be fair, they recognise that need, particularly in areas such as India and China, but it is not clear whether their policies are working. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what progress is being made to help small manufacturers in emerging markets.

The second challenge for public policy is the increasing importance of intangible assets, such as design, branding and software, and it is important to consider carefully how they can be encouraged. It may seem counter-intuitive that such intangibles should matter to manufacturers, but the difference between a key manufacturer and its competitor often lies in its know-how and creativity. Fortunately, we have great strengths in design, whether in computer games or luxury car brands. We should

have confidence in our belief that we can build on those strengths. A crucial issue—it would be helpful if the Minister responded to this—is the Government's progress in protecting our intellectual property. Leading manufacturers cite intellectual property's critical role in their ability to maintain their position. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what the Government have done about that during the past six months.

Perhaps a more pressing question that many manufacturers raise with me is the growing gap between schemes that the Government have announced and the money that businesses have received. There seems to be a gulf between Ministers' rhetoric and the reality in the business world. Instead of our plan for a single loan guarantee scheme, Ministers have launched a plethora of schemes, but have failed to make them work. We have the working capital scheme, the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, the capital for enterprise fund, the transition loan fund, the European Investment Bank's supported loan scheme for growing firms, the EIB-backed automotive industry loan scheme, and the £1 billion non-EIB-backed automotive loan scheme. All have different rules and criteria. They have different forms and require different business data. The result is confusion for businesses, and failure to deliver in Whitehall.

The capital for enterprise fund, for example, is worth £75 million for expanding firms. It was launched in November, and we were told that it would invest from January, but in June reports from the Government suggested that nothing had been invested. Perhaps the Minister will confirm whether any business has received money and, if not, why not.

The automotive assistance programme comprises two elements: a £1.3 billion loan guarantee from the European Investment Bank, and a £1 billion additional loan guarantee to help the car industry to develop low-carbon technologies. The programme was announced in January, when the French and German Governments had already delivered money to their car makers. Since then, Ministers have dithered and delayed in working out schemes and negotiating with companies. In February, *The Birmingham Post*, frustrated by the lack of progress, wrote an open and critical letter to the noble Lord Mandelson asking when Ministers would act. February went, and March came and went, but in April Ministers proudly announced a loan of £340 million for Jaguar Land Rover and a £370 million loan for Nissan. That was good news, but on 6 May it became clear that the talks with Tata were slipping and struggling, and in danger of collapse. So here we are, five months on, and it is still unclear exactly what has happened to the money. Will the Minister tell us whether a British company has received funds under that programme? The German Government have delivered, and the French and Italian Governments have delivered. Why under our Government are British manufacturers the last to receive the help that they have been promised?

The Prime Minister likes to talk about providing real help, and I suspect that he needs it at the moment, but he and his ministerial colleagues need to realise that talk is cheap. At the moment, their record is one of press releases, not practical action. It is a tale of dither and delay, of bold promises and then timid deeds. I have no doubt that Ministers wish to help, but my fear is that the gap between their rhetoric and the reality for businesses is one through which hundreds of manufacturers and thousands of workers could yet be lost.

10.50 am

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Kevin Brennan): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time under your chairmanship, Mr. Fraser; I welcome you to that role. I thank the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Prisk) for his generosity in wishing me a long period in post. I am not sure that that is officially his party's policy, but I thank him in any case.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) on securing this timely and important debate on manufacturing and employment. In the very short time that I have been in post, I have already learned that he is very active in this field. He raised a number of issues, which I shall come to in my remarks, including wage subsidies and whether it is too easy to get rid of workers in the United Kingdom.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on his contribution. He gave examples of successful manufacturers in his constituency, including Renishaw and Delphi, and talked, importantly, about the help that Train to Gain has been able to offer those companies during the current economic downturn. He asked a series of specific questions. I shall have to write to him about those; I have put that on the record to ensure that it happens.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Tony Lloyd), who made the important points that his city would not exist as we know it if it had not been for free trade, and that in supporting British manufacturing we need to ensure that we note the importance of international trade. He made very good points about procurement and about further education and apprenticeships.

This has been an important and interesting debate. The Government are deeply conscious of the importance of the manufacturing sector to all our constituencies and to the country as a whole. After all, it is what catapulted this country on to the world stage in the first place. Long before globalisation was a term in common usage, Britain was regarded as the workshop of the world, exporting more than half its iron, coal and cotton cloth. The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley played a vital role in the cotton industry as part of that.

Of course, times have changed and manufacturing is changing with the times, shifting its base towards more and more high-tech manufacturing. Companies are developing in exciting new areas such as fuel cells, plastic electronics and Bluetooth technology. Traditional sectors have reinvented themselves through information and communications technology, software and new technologies such as robotics and materials. Nevertheless, our capability in advanced engineering remains world class.

Despite the changes in manufacturing industry, it remains in some ways the unsung hero of the British economy. The statistics only partially indicate the significance of the manufacturing industry to our economy. However, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (John Thurso) said, we remain a major manufacturer in world terms. We are the sixth-largest manufacturer in terms of value. At the end of 2008, the manufacturing industries in this country employed close to 3 million people and accounted for 12.6 per cent. or

[Kevin Brennan]

£157.7 billion of our national output. In addition, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley said, manufacturing is responsible for 75 per cent. of our business research and development. Even taking account of the global economic downturn, productivity in manufacturing has been growing at a rapid rate in the UK; it has grown by more than 50 per cent. since 1997. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross pointed out, that is growth in real terms, albeit at a time when other sectors of the economy have been growing more rapidly because of the changes that we have seen in the structure of our economy.

However, we are here today because of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley made about the way in which manufacturing, along with other sectors, is suffering in the global recession. The latest data show that manufacturing output has fallen for 13 months in a row. That is also happening in other countries, but as he pointed out, that is no consolation to the hard-working men and women in our communities who have jobs in manufacturing and who are affected by those changes. Nor is it any consolation to those who have had to switch to short-time working or who have had to lose their jobs as a result of the economic downturn.

In many of the communities affected, memories are still fresh of the 1980s and '90s. Then, when there was a downturn and manufacturing was suffering, there was a very different response—some would say no response—from the Government. It was an approach not of trying to be fair to those communities, but of simply being laissez-faire in their attitude towards the economic downturn and towards manufacturing at that time. That has changed.

Mr. Prisk: On that point, can the Minister tell me how many British companies have actually received funds under the automotive assistance package?

Kevin Brennan: I cannot at this point. I will write to the hon. Gentleman later, if he will allow me, given that I have been in post for just a few hours. I will write to him when I have the opportunity. However, I will make the point that at least the present Government are putting forward real help for industry in a way that was not the philosophy when his party was last in power.

Mr. Hoyle: Much has been made of our not helping and supporting the automotive industry. I can tell hon. Members that the Select Committee on Business and Enterprise, of which I am a member, has recently taken evidence from Jaguar Land Rover and other car companies and the components sector, which welcome the initiatives, help and support that Jaguar Land Rover has been given by the Government. I must reassure hon. Members that Jaguar Land Rover is very pleased and wishes to continue with the help and support that the Government have given it.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, which was, as ever, very helpful, fair and reasonable. In the short time left, I shall try to address the point that I think he wanted to get to in the debate, which is his debate, after all. I am referring to wage subsidies. That is something that the Government have carefully and extensively examined. There are two reasons why currently the Government have not decided to proceed with the idea. First, there is the question whether such schemes can be effective and would be value for money. Secondly, there is the experience of that idea in the past. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud mentioned the 1970s, when wage subsidies were in place. The question is whether what happened represented value for money or whether firms took the subsidy and did what they would have done anyway.

That said, the Government do understand the anxiety and difficulty faced by people who find themselves out of pocket on shorter working weeks, so we are ensuring that there is support for them. We have expanded the Train to Gain scheme. Hon. Members acknowledged that during the debate. That is the Government's flagship skills service that supports employers of all sizes and in all sectors to improve their employees' skills. From January of this year, struggling small and medium-sized enterprises have been able to access increased training provision to help them to emerge stronger in the upturn. That includes bite-size qualifications in business-critical areas and more funding for second qualifications. In the meantime, individuals and families on tax credits will see an automatic increase in the money that they receive, to compensate for the loss of income. In March, for example, 355,000 families were receiving on average £35 a week more support through tax credits.

Where there are significant redundancies in the manufacturing sector, the rapid response service is working to move people quickly into new jobs, preventing them from becoming detached from the labour market. We have doubled the funding for the service already and will double it again. As we are particularly concerned to help the long-term unemployed, we are also making available 75,000 further education training places for Jobcentre Plus referrals after six months' unemployment, taking on board the important points that hon. Members made about further education.

I would like to go on and outline how we are preparing for the upturn, which we hope is coming—many hon. Members referred to that—but I fear that time will not allow me to do so. Our challenge now is to ensure that our manufacturing sector is ready to lead the industrial revolution of tomorrow, just as this country led the industrial revolution of the past.

Council Tax Capping (Surrey)

11 am

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am delighted that you are our Chairman, Mr. Fraser. I am also delighted to have so many of my colleagues here—they look a little like a Maori Haka troupe, and I hope that the Minister will take note of that. We have a mascot as well—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps I should wait until the Minister is seated and listening.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this subject for debate. I think that I am correct in saying that every Surrey MP, whether they are here or not, backs what I have to say. We have deep concerns about the effects of capping and the re-billing of the capped council tax, which the Government have, as anticipated, demanded. We all realise that the order that is required to introduce capping has yet to be introduced, and the Minister may feel even more limited in what he can say, but I have called the debate to persuade him that if he continues with capping by introducing the order, he should do so in such a way as not to require re-billing. He also needs to recognise that all of us in Surrey believe in value for money and in protecting the council tax payer.

In looking at the effects of capping on Surrey police and of the pending requirement to re-bill all Surrey for its council tax, I need to do a certain amount of scene setting. Surrey police are a county force, but with metropolitan challenges. They describe the county as a target-rich environment, with a disproportionate number of high-risk potential targets. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary says that Surrey police are in the top half of our country's forces in terms of the threat from organised crime. With the county being criss-crossed by some of the busiest motorways in Europe, and with Heathrow on one side and Gatwick on the other, the threats are obvious.

Surrey's close proximity to London explains why approximately half the criminal activity in the county is perpetrated by those living outside it. To take one example from last year, Surrey tackled 17 organised crime groups, of which 12 were London based. That cost Surrey at least £40 million. The police grant for Surrey is the lowest per head in the country. As a consequence, council tax payers, unlike those in every other police authority, share the cost of our police at a ratio of 49: 51. Furthermore, there has been a year-on-year real-terms reduction in police grant over the past 12 years.

Surrey police have responded, as we would hope, by delivering more in a better way and for less. A recent Audit Commission assessment of the authority's value for money gave Surrey police the highest rating in 2007-08. The commission's report said:

> "When compared to similar forces Surrey Police receives a very low level of grant funding from central government and has the lowest expenditure per Band D property of any force in England and Wales. The high level of performance from a relatively low level of funding demonstrates excellent value for money to the taxpayer".

During its inspections last year, HMIC also gave the performance of Surrey police a glowing report. More importantly perhaps, ratings from victims who were surveyed and from the general public give Surrey police a satisfaction rate of more than 80 per cent. Surrey police work on the basis of being a modern, innovative police force. They have led the way in developing neighbourhood policing, work force modernisation and common-sense policing.

Mr. Jeremy Hunt (South-West Surrey) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on calling this incredibly important debate on an issue about which people in Surrey feel extremely strongly. He mentioned neighbourhood policing, but does he agree that however frustrated people in Surrey feel about the many failures of Government policy on law and order, neighbourhood policing is perhaps the one area in which they feel that there have been huge improvements in recent years? It would be an enormous tragedy if rate capping and the loss of 50 police posts led to cuts in the one area of policy that seems to have been working.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank my hon. Friend. He has picked on one of the key points that I and, I assume, many of my hon. Friends will touch on later in this short debate.

In setting their 2009-10 budget, Surrey police have been forced to cut another 144 posts by focusing on non-operational areas and investing in new technology. They have also managed to move extra resources to the front line. Without capping, the force is, in essence, delivering unrivalled value for money for the community. The latest reductions were carefully considered and programmed early, without the urgency that will come from capping and re-billing. It is astonishing that the police authority has been singled out for capping when it clearly delivers value for money.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. While he is setting the scene, will he explain the scale of the reduction in grant funding that Surrey has had to undergo since 1997? I believe that it is in the region of 40 per cent. in real terms.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank my hon. Friend. He is right. In 1997, Surrey police received £96 per head of population in Government grant. Twelve years later, in 2009, Surrey residents received £93 per person in police grant. That is a real-terms reduction of 39—not quite 40—per cent.

Surrey police force and the Surrey police authority have reached their tipping point, and operational policing in Surrey can no longer be protected from the cumulative effects of more than a decade of underfunding, let alone any capping or re-billing. Last month, the former Home Secretary gave a commitment to maintain increased funding for the police grant, which she said would enable the Government at least to maintain police numbers. That may be true across the whole nation, but it is certainly not true in Surrey, and it will be even less true with capping, re-billing and the progressive annual tightening of the budget.

Of course, there is an argument over the figures. Last year, the Secretary of State set out a net budget requirement increase of 4.82 per cent., but the actual increase in the net budget requirement was 3.82 per cent. This year, the increase in the precept levied by Surrey police was 4.89 per cent., but to my surprise, I discovered that the Department for Communities and Local Government claimed that the precept had risen by 7.07 per cent. The Department based that on a notional precept, and the idea of a notional precept is key.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

There is also an argument over reserves. Surrey police have reserves of £9.4 million, much of which is clearly not available, because, technically, only general reserves are available for expenditure. Those reserves stand at £5.6 million, or 2.6 per cent. of the budget, but HMIC and the Audit Commission insist that that be lifted to 3 per cent. That, too, will have an impact, on top of the capping and the re-billing expenditure.

As someone who has, in the past, been involved in programmed expenditure cuts, I am abundantly aware of the fact that one of the worst effects of capping is that it is applied at the beginning of, or during, the financial year in question. That means that cuts in expenditure at a late stage in the financial year must compensate for the failure to achieve a full-year effect from the beginning of the financial year—in simple terms, the percentage cut must be higher to achieve the full-year effect.

With the prospect of capping in mind, the authority began setting this year's budget in July 2008. The budget was carefully calculated and took account of the principles set out by the Secretary of State. The idea of a notional precept was raised, and Surrey police finance officials shared their concerns with lawyers from the Department for Communities and Local Government. The lawyers confirmed in writing that

"there is no requirement on the Surrey police authority to calculate the notional level of Council Tax (based on the notional budget requirement) 2008/09 and Surrey police authority will set their budget requirement and their precept for 2009/10...in the normal way".

To avoid capping and its effects, the authority carefully calculated the budget. Three days before setting the budget, the Department announced a notional 2008-09 budget and a notional band D council tax. That left the police authority with the threat of capping. Given that the cuts arising from capping were late and unplanned, they had an extra detrimental effect on the force.

In the past financial year, the Surrey police work force was 4,229-strong. The continuing prospect of capping means that the authority must produce a progressive extrapolation of financial constraints, which produces a series of cuts as the Surrey police authority calculates its manpower for the years 2009-10 to 2012-13. That commences with the loss of 159 personnel this year, with a total loss of 373 personnel by the end of the process, and that is before designation and re-billing.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration not only that are there significant manpower issues in relation to the capping itself, but that the re-billing exercise will add an additional cost that is wholly unnecessary and will put extra burdens on the district councils required to carry it out and lead to a further cut in manpower, at a time when a county that must deal with the policing of Heathrow, the M25 and Gatwick airport will also, I fear, face increased overspill crime from London, because of a rise in property crime rates resulting from the recession? Does he agree that the capping is the wrong thing to do, at the wrong time?

Sir Paul Beresford: Completely; I think that all Opposition Members would agree with that statement.

The cost of designation is a further £1.6 million cut. The cumulative effect, over the same period, is another 55 personnel. Re-billing will cost Surrey police authority £1.2 million, and that translates into a further manpower reduction of 24. Over that time the population increase in Surrey will continue, and so will the threat of crime—particularly cross-border crime—and the anticipated threat of terrorism. The broad figures are that if the Government insist on going ahead with the capping order, and on re-billing, it will cost Surrey police authority £1.2 million to reduce the council tax bill by £1.6 million.

On Thursday, I received a response to a parliamentary question, from the Minister of State for Local Government that stated:

"Subject to the approval of an order by the House of Commons, the reduction in Band D council tax in Surrey as a result of capping will be £3.18." [*Official Report*, 4 June 2009; Vol. 493, c. 678W.]

According to Mole Valley district council, my main billing authority, the overall cost to it of re-billing is £172,000. That translates to an approximate cost per bill of £4.65. That means that in band D it costs £1.47 more than the reduction. Obviously, the balance is worse for the lower bands. It is not until band F that the negative balance is reversed. I hope that the Minister can visualise the huge sigh of relief in every band D household as the annual bill drops, by the Government's order, by £3.18. I can see thousands of taxpayers rushing to buy a bottle of cheap wine, equivalent to £3.18, to celebrate. However, as most of them pay in 10 instalments, the reduction will be 32p a month over 10 months. Perhaps after saving 32p a month for 10 months it will be a pint of beer, a packet of crisps and a packet of peanuts at the pub.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that at a time when public spending will be tightly constrained anyway it is incumbent on Governments to ensure that every penny of public money is carefully used, and that the Government have failed abjectly to do that in the case that is being outlined? First, they have failed to set out clearly what was required of Surrey police authority, so that it could take action that would not lead to the present situation; secondly, they have proposed a disproportionate response, which no taxpayer will accept as a sensible way of dealing with a rather small excess, as it will, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, cost nearly the entirety of what will be recovered to undertake re-billing.

Sir Paul Beresford: My hon. Friend's timing is perfect. I expect the effect of the re-billing notice on most council tax payers to be confusion or bemusement. If they are aware of the cost of the re-billing to the already strapped police force, they will be furious. Local authorities throughout Surrey will have to reset their direct debits for every council tax payer who pays by that means. Many thousands of people pay by bankers' orders and will have to send off new bankers' order forms, which will probably cost about 20 per cent. of the so-called saving, and there may be additional costs at the banks.

That is perhaps the smile side, if there is one, to the re-billing problem, but there is a deeply serious effect. My constituency is a mixture of rural and semi-rural. It has two main towns—Dorking and Leatherhead—and approximately 32 villages spread across the countryside.

and considerable numbers of relatively isolated houses in between. In the past several years, organised crime and individual thefts of agricultural property on Surrey farms have cost hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. Several years ago, such crime was successfully targeted by a special police team in Surrey, and following its success, Surrey police set up a single liaison officer for farmers, known as the farm liaison officer. That was a full-time job. With last year's cuts it became a half-time job. I am concerned that, as Surrey police authority looks around for further savings because of the re-billing and the designation, that key officer may have to be drawn back in, and the post may go.

Antisocial behaviour is a big problem at the moment. It is continually sprouting up in my area, showing its ugly head in forms varying from general abuse through to shop and household window-breaking. It has now moved on to unlawful purchasing and semi-organised theft, by groups, of alcohol. The latest problem is a series of serious arson attacks in different towns and villages. Generally, Surrey police have been successful in stemming the tide of those activities and acting either pre-emptively or preventively. When that is not possible, there has been an organised attack on the problem. However, the greatest value comes, as was mentioned in an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mr. Hunt), from neighbourhood specialist officers. Those individuals are present in the neighbouring police force, where they are also very successful. The Metropolitan police have one neighbourhood specialist officer per 100 crimes. At the moment—before the cuts that will have to be made—Surrey police have less than half a neighbourhood specialist officer per 100 crimes. I have been talking to a local police inspector in one of my towns, which is having a lot of difficulty from three dozen or so youths, who work either in groups or gangs. The most likely effect of capping is that the inspector may have to reduce the number of front-line neighbourhood officers following the capping and re-billing.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. Ten of the 11 Members of Parliament for Surrey constituencies are attending the debate. The only absentee is my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), the shadow Secretary of State for Education, who is addressing a major education conference this morning. I hope that that fact will impress on the Minister the seriousness with which all Surrey MPs view the issue.

My hon. Friend has been talking about neighbourhood specialist officers: I do not want such local intelligence to disappear from my area, not least because last night, Surrey police managed to arrest a burglar who attacked my premises in my constituency. I take this occasion to thank Surrey police for their rapid intervention and the welcome arrest of someone who will, I hope, be brought to justice in due course. My hon. Friend has done a singular service in securing the debate, and the Minister should be under no illusions as to how important the issue is in Surrey, and how insane the capping proposal is, when viewed in simple common-sense terms.

Sir Paul Beresford: I think that common sense is the theme, but I am always a little dubious about using the term, as it has been misaligned in the past.

The case for Surrey police being capped is wrong. The effect on the safety of the people of Mole Valley and Surrey will be quite marked. To add to the arguably incorrect injury the unnecessary cost of re-billing each council tax payer for such a minuscule amount is ludicrous. I ask the Minister to accept, if the Government win the anticipated judicial review, that although they will have made their point—however erroneous—they should not require the unnecessary re-billing. The legislation allows that, and common sense demands it.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): I intend that the winding-up speeches should start at about 12 o'clock, depending on how many hon. Members want to speak.

11.19 am

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Fraser, and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). He initiated the debate but, as has already been pointed out, all Surrey MPs are very much alongside him. It takes quite a lot to pull all the Surrey MPs together on one issue, but today we are debating that issue, which is county-wide. The Government's attitude to Surrey police beggars belief. One of the best forces is being undermined, year by year, by the Government's funding formula.

The force is being treated as a rural force but it is on the outskirts of London. As my hon. Friend said, its area is criss-crossed by major roads. Several times, it has had to respond to terrorist outbreaks at the airports on either side, at Heathrow and Gatwick. The county also suffers from trans-border crime, which crosses into it from London—and particularly into my constituency, which borders it. It suffers from a disparity of treatment between the Metropolitan police and the Surrey police force.

Surrey Members with borders that are contiguous with London know that at the beginning of this decade some of their constituencies were covered by the Metropolitan police. That changed when the then Home Secretary agreed that Surrey would be properly respected. Its ordinary policemen and women are under a lot of pressure; they are trained in Surrey but are often attracted by higher wages and salaries to the capital. London, of course, is much better funded. I was one of those who supported Surrey having its own police force.

I ask the Government to think carefully about a matter of equity. Given that council tax payers in Surrey contribute almost 50 per cent. of the cost of the Surrey police, it is incumbent on the Government to reconsider the formula. Given that the Surrey taxpayer contributes considerable sums to the country's overall tax revenues, and that we are helping to fund other parts of the country, it would be appropriate for us to be given slightly better treatment when it comes to the funding of the Surrey force. To make matters worse, we are being capped. As my hon. Friend so eloquently pointed out, capping yields little except disadvantage to people who live in Surrey. The effect is alarming. The cost of the refunding equates to 24 officers—at least two per borough in Surrey might need to be taken out.

All Surrey Members could argue about the importance of their local police. For instance, two of my police stations are manned by volunteers. They provide an

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excellent service for the community, and they receive a lot of support from the officers; they, too, do a tremendous job. However, we may be losing the volunteers, in Cobham and elsewhere, despite the fact that they have provided an identifiable service to the public, reassuring the public that they are being protected.

The other issue that Surrey police have to face, apart from the question of community and neighbourhood policing, is that occasional big events require them to keep financial reserves. The Government cannot decide that reserves should be raided to suit their political policies. They are necessary; incidents, including terrorist incidents, need a response, as do major crimes. For instance, some years ago Milly Dowler was murdered outside Walton station. The police investigation continues; in theory, it is still ongoing, but the inquiry continued for several years at virtually full strength, until the allegation was made that someone who is now behind bars for other reasons may have committed the crime.

Surrey police need to respond to other issues, but that often requires them to make exceptional calls on reserves in order to meet the additional costs. In the past, when I and my colleagues have taken up cases, we have lobbied the Government for better treatment in order to balance the county's financial position. For instance, it sometimes has to respond to events at Heathrow—and not only terrorism: occasionally, misguided environmental protests require a lot of police attention, and security is a concern.

We are looking for a sensible balance. First, we should avoid re-billing. That is the principal reason for today's debate. Secondly, we should reconsider how the funding formula works. In equity, it must be wrong to undermine progressively a force that has already made substantial cuts, year on year, and that will need to do so again. Thirdly, the Government should persuade the people of Surrey that they, the Government, understand that undermining a police force is not the way to improve people's sense of security.

The Government have made a monumental misjudgment. It is a miscalculation, based on a theoretical precept, and it should be abandoned. Whether it should be abandoned after judicial review I shall not say, but it should certainly be withdrawn gracefully. The Surrey police force should be allowed to rebuild, to help the people of Surrey feel secure; they live on the edge of London and are already paying half the cost of the force.

11.25 am

Anne Milton (Guildford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this debate. As we have heard, it is hard to herd Surrey MPs. The fact that we are all here shows our strength of feeling, and I hope that the Minister will take note of that.

As time is short, I shall not say more on matters that were so eloquently mentioned by my hon. Friend. However, some key factors must be re-emphasised. Surrey police force is a county force with urban challenges; it borders two airports and some of the busiest motorways in London. Half of the crime there is committed by people from outside Surrey. Indeed, Lord West acknowledged criminals as

"people doing 'away days' from London in order to redistribute wealth."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 12 January 2009; Vol. 706, c. 1012.]

The Audit Commission assessment states that there is no doubt that Surrey police have managed their affairs and finances excellently and that they give value for money of the highest grade, being one of only six forces that achieved that status in 2007-08. The force has the lowest expenditure per band D property.

Much of what Surrey police do is excellent, but with tight resources it is not always perfect. To a large extent, resourcing has been a continuing problem for the force, and it acknowledges that it cannot always give the service that it would like. Rightly, it is cutting 144 back-office jobs and replacing them with technology improvements to hold on to its front-line force, but it faces losing another 50 front-line jobs if the Government have their way.

Policing in Guildford is not easy. We have a busy night-time economy, persistent crime in the large rural areas, and some serious antisocial behaviour, much of which involves criminal damage. Indeed, antisocial behaviour is often a euphemism for crime. There is terrible criminal damage; someone stole a saw and cut down trees on an estate, elderly residents are being terrorised and are afraid to go out in the evenings; and a local business woman could not cope with the police response to the number of racist and violent attacks on her staff and now employs her own private security. It is not good enough.

Given the tight police budgets, with the best will in the world the police cannot respond as they want; they are angry and the public are frustrated. Too many kids are getting away with completely unacceptable behaviour. I cannot speak too highly of the community wardens, the police and community support officers and the neighbourhood specialist officers in Guildford. However, poor resources leave many areas badly wanting. The public are not getting the service that they deserve; it falls well short.

I now give a quick plug to the Street Angels project in Guildford. Those not familiar with Street Angels should come to Guildford in the evening and watch. Set up by the churches in Guildford, they support the town police. Surrey police have been excellent in working with them, and we have seen a real drop in crime. None the less, it is difficult.

I get very tired of having to listen to Ministers telling us what they are giving us. The truth is that in 1997 we were receiving £96 per head; in 2009 we are getting £93 per head. As a result, 50 per cent. of the funding comes from the council tax payer; elsewhere in the country, it is approximately 25 per cent. We in Surrey raise a lot of money for the Treasury, and we are not getting a good deal in return.

This year, the situation is ridiculous. The Government rejected attempts by Surrey police to meet officials and Ministers. The Department for Communities and Local Government created the notional precept, and I know that the Surrey police force is considering taking legal action on that. Police officials raised the concept of a notional precept with the DCLG, but were reassured that they should set their budget as normal. Three days before the Surrey police authority set its budget, the Government wrote to say that they had not yet determined

any capping principles. With officials refusing to talk to it, Surrey police authority had to set a budget in the dark.

I hope that the Minister will respond to many of the arguments raised today. Everyone in Surrey, and Guildford in particular, wants their council tax bills to fall, but they also want to be safe. The police struggle, and the public are cross, fearful and not getting the service that they deserve. The Minister has it within his power to reconsider this matter before he lays the draft order. I hope that he does not come out with the usual platitudes. We have heard that the Prime Minister is very keen to listen to people, and I sincerely hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to listen to the people of Surrey.

11.30 am

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Fraser, and I offer my very sincere congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this debate. I thank him and my hon. Friends the Members for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) and for Guildford (Anne Milton) for laying out the arguments. It bears repeating to the Minister that the fact that all available Surrey MPs are here today proves that we all feel very strongly about the matter before us.

In this brief speech, I shall not deal with some of the arguments made already—they were well made and stand up—but focus only on terrorism as it affects Surrey. It is a real problem for Surrey police and their funding. As has been said, Heathrow and Gatwick, the two principal airports in this country, are on our borders. I am old enough—I do not suspect that you are, Mr. Fraser—to remember the days when a separate police force for our airports was in existence. It might have been 30 years ago—I cannot remember—but it was a very long time ago when the British Airports Authority police, which was an entirely separate force, looked after policing issues at Gatwick and Heathrow.

In those days, many of today's problems did not exist, and it was right that there came a time when the terrorism situation—an incident at Heathrow perhaps—resulted in the abolition, in due course, of those police forces specifically covering Gatwick and Heathrow. It meant that the threat of terrorism associated with our airports had been recognised. Surrey police—I know this because I have spoken to the chief constable and many others—have had to invest much time and money in protecting the county and its surrounding areas from terrorist threats. This is a very serious issue.

A few months ago, I visited the noble Lord West, the security Minister, to discuss terrorism, especially in relation to Surrey, and the question of funding. I and the noble Lord Trefgarne, who was also at the meeting—he is a Woking resident and takes a great interest in these matters—made Lord West well aware of the real-term cuts and the awful way in which we think that Surrey police have been treated financially over the years. We also made a very strong statement to him about terrorist and other such threats in our county, and went into confidential matters that I cannot repeat today—they followed detailed briefings that we had received. We also put to him very clearly the argument about the funding basis.

I expect the Minister to tell me that he has met with Lord West to discuss what I and Lord Trefgarne said to him. I expect that the Minister knows the date of the meeting and has been briefed about it and our position. What was the result of our meeting? Were our fears and concerns taken on board? It seems to me and Lord Trefgarne that our concerns, emanating from the very top of Surrey police force, about this huge issue of terrorism, have not been recognised and taken into account.

That is the only issue that I want to raise today, because I take a particular interest in it. My constituents agree with the powerful arguments made by my hon. Friends today. Their concerns are felt deeply throughout Surrey, not only by residents themselves—they, after all, are the most important people—but by the Members of Parliament who represent them. That is why we are here today laying out our compelling arguments, one of which is about funding in relation to terrorist threats. I hope that the Minister will deal with that specifically when he replies.

11.35 am

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to be down here, for a change, rather than where you are, Mr. Fraser, and able to make a speech in Westminster Hall.

Until the Government set up the Greater London authority, the whole of my constituency was part of the Metropolitan police district. The Government argued that my constituents would get better policing and feel more comfortable with a county constabulary than by being policed by London. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), I believed and supported them. Years later, I find myself having to say that what is being delivered, through no fault of Surrey police, is not what we would have expected had we remained within the Metropolitan police district. Do not get me wrong—I do not want to return to it—but we were told that the service would improve, but the reality is as has been depicted today.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who introduced this debate, I have long experience of local government and have watched successive Governments introduce formulas, add to them, simplify them, abolish them and reintroduce them, in the fond belief that they can find one that will get everything right, everywhere. But they cannot! There have to be special cases. The worst possible sort of formula is an inflexible one, which is what we are dealing with this morning. My hon. Friend was worried about mentioning common sense. I do not apologise for mentioning it, because I was brought up by a headmaster who would not have more than 12 rules in his school. He insisted that the 12th was that the above 11 were no substitute for common sense. That is the issue today.

Surrey faces special problems that the Government refuse to recognise. I shall briefly mention three of them. The first, which has been mentioned already, is Heathrow, parts of which are in my constituency, although the airfield itself is not. Of the 30-odd sites that are checked regularly as possible places from which terrorists could attack the airport, a goodly number are in my constituency. Already, due to the pressures, Surrey police has to get the Met to help it do the job that the

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Government expect it to do but will not fund it properly to do. The Government are introducing measures to force BAA to pay the full cost to the Met of policing the airfield, but to the best of my knowledge—perhaps the Minister will correct me—no attempt has been made to allow the knock-on costs to Surrey to be charged to BAA as well. Our constituents have to pay for that, and if ever there were a special case, that is it. Some concession must be made for the Government's ever-growing demands for security measures at Heathrow. I am sure that my hon. Friends who know more about Gatwick than I do would advance the same case. However, Heathrow is on my doorstep, so I make that case myself.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: As a Member whose constituency borders Gatwick, I confirm that my hon. Friend is right. May I add another thing that has not been mentioned? One of the biggest crime hotspots in my constituency is Clacket Lane service station on the M25, which is a hotbed of vice of all kinds and a real problem for those policing the eastern part of Surrey. Let us not forget the problems created there as well.

Mr. Wilshire: I have been a customer of my hon. Friend's service station—I hope that I did not add to the crime while I was there—which gives me the opportunity to mention my concern about motorway issues. In places, the constituency boundary goes down the middle of the carriageway. My constituency includes the busiest part of the M25, which is the busiest motorway in the United Kingdom. There has been no recognition of that or the fact that the Staines junction, junction 13, has the highest accident record of any junction on the whole of the M25—that was true the last time that I checked. The formula does not take into account the special case that arises there. The county force is expected to deliver the quality of service that everyone has a right to expect, when those involved in accidents on the M25 are often not residents of Surrey. It is very rare for a Surrey resident to be involved in such an accident, so our constituents have to pay the cost of other people's accidents, which is unreasonable.

Let me pick up the point about cross-border crime. My hon. Friends have mentioned London. My constituency is caught in a pincer movement. I can tell when places such as Hounslow and Hammersmith and Fulham are having a purge on crime, because the M4 gets busy and crime rates go up in my constituency. People rush out of London, down the M4 and turn into my constituency and cause trouble. When we have dealt with that, the next thing we find is that Thames Valley police is having a purge in Slough, so the people of Slough get on the M4 and come rushing down to my constituency and cause mayhem from the other direction. Yet a rural county force is expected to deal with that without any special recognition, which is wrong.

Plenty of people, including the Audit Commission, the inspectorate and my residents, say that Surrey has an excellent police force. Our constituents probably pay the greatest amount of tax of any county in England into the central Exchequer. We do not mind doing that, because it is only fair that wealthier areas should make a greater contribution. We understand that, but is it unreasonable to say that we should get a fair return from Government grant for our needs rather than just being used to provide money that is sent somewhere else?

11.42 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I was not intending to speak in this debate, but, as my hon. Friends have been admirably succinct, we have a little time left, so I should like to take the opportunity to make a short contribution. Unfortunately, I have to leave at 12 o'clock, and I apologise in advance for any discourtesy.

My hon. Friends have set out very clearly the underlying pressures facing Surrey police. Surrey is a target-rich environment; there are many temptations for criminals and we have proximity to a pool of crime, which is both organised and opportunistic, in the London conurbation. Surrey police have a small level of reserves, and I hope that the Minister will not suggest that the reserves should be raided to meet some of the pressures that the force is facing. We need those reserves to deal with unexpected events. My hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) referred to the Milly Dowler case, which involved an extraordinary police operation costing millions of pounds. In my own constituency a few years earlier, we were unwilling hosts to an unwilling guest—the former President of the Chilean Republic, General Pinochet. That operation cost Surrey police well in excess of £1 million. At the time, we were promised categorically that there would be no net cost to Surrey taxpayers, but the reimbursement from central Government never came close to meeting the full cost of that policing operation. It is for such reasons that forces have to maintain appropriate reserves.

Let me dwell for a moment on process. While the points about the underlying funding and underfunding of Surrey police force have been well made, my concern about this particular issue relates to process. Having read the facts, I have to say that Franz Kafka would have been impressed by the way in which the Government convey—or, rather, do not convey—detailed information to precepting authorities to enable them to set a precept that will not fall foul of rules that have not been made at the time the precept is set. I should also like to address the question of the proportionality of the response. I hope that the Minister has some good news for us today. There will not be anyone in this country in the current environment who thinks that spending £1.2 million of public money to return £1.6 million to Surrey council tax payers is a sensible way to proceed. I suggest to the Minister that he is in danger of appearing to be pursuing an agenda of petty political vindictiveness rather than an agenda of common sense.

Anne Milton: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is either incompetence or cock-up? Such a policy is either political vindictiveness or it is Government gone completely mad. It is exactly this sort of thing that is driving the public mad.

Mr. Hammond: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that it is not petty political vindictiveness. Let us explore whether it is a kind of institutional vindictiveness. By that I mean a situation in which the centre cannot bear to be ignored or defied, even inadvertently, and has to slap back in a disproportionate response. I hope that the Minister—whether or not he is prepared to say so

today—will privately reflect on a situation in which such a disproportionate response is mandated by the system.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: It is a ludicrous situation. My hon. Friend sets it out very clearly. I know that he personally keeps a very close eye on public spending and value for money. Does he have any thoughts about the additional cost to the taxpayer of the Government proceeding to fight a judicial review?

Mr. Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that such a review would pile insult on to injury. Instead of £1.2 million to deal with a £1.6 million over-billing, we may be talking about a situation in which the total bill has climbed beyond £1.6 million. Although I do not think that anyone on the Conservative Benches would argue that there does not need to be a solution to the over-billing that has taken place, there is an objection to a cap and re-bill proposal that will cost at least £1.2 million.

I suggest to the Minister that he should use two tests when deciding whether to proceed down this route. First, will it satisfy those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries—those who are supposed to be protected by it, and band D council tax payers who will receive a £3 reduction in their annual council tax bill and will have to use up a significant proportion of it setting up a new direct debit or standing order? I suggest to him that it will not.

Secondly, will it satisfy what has famously been described as the court of public opinion on the common sense test? Will the taxpayers of this country at large think that this was a sensible and proportionate intervention by the Government? Clearly they will not. I suggest to the Minister that he will greatly enhance his own reputation if he can intervene in this matter. He should act with common sense in the present case and discuss with his colleagues a way forward for the future—if there is a future for them—in which clear guidance is set out in a timely fashion. That would help to ensure that no other authority, police, local or otherwise, ever finds itself in a situation of over-billing as a consequence of not clearly understanding the baseline against which it should be working and the capping guidelines that the Government of the day wish to impose. In that way, we would have clear information and a pragmatic response when something goes wrong.

I hope that despite the Conservatives' concerns, the Minister will engage in the debate in a spirit of common sense to find a solution that satisfies the needs to spend public money carefully and wisely and to protect the taxpayers of Surrey, and also protects the services that Surrey police wish to continue delivering to their citizens and our constituents. Those people certainly hope that the services continue to be provided for them.

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): Unless any other Member wishes to make a contribution in the available time, I shall turn to the wind-ups.

11.51 am

Sarah Teather (Brent, East) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate. I sincerely apologise for missing the first minute of his speech—I was held up on my way here.

Sir Paul Beresford: It was a good minute.

Sarah Teather: I am sure that it was a very important minute and I sincerely apologise.

The problems with capping have been characterised perfectly clearly in the debate. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the cost of police jobs and the impact on the local area, the potential impacts on the budget for many years to come, and the nonsense of the Government expecting a police authority to eat into its own reserves. A number of hon. Members explained that that is like using a hammer to crack a nut. It is a ridiculous situation: budgets are set on a notional basis and it is as if local authorities are working out what they are supposed to be doing entirely in shadow. We have notional budgets, caps and council tax levels, and nobody knows what they are supposed to be doing until well after they have set the budget.

It is telling that so many of Surrey's MPs are here to speak in favour of their police authority. My understanding is that local Liberal Democrats have been supporting the police authority in this action, so the Labour party is rather on its own.

The problem is that capping comes right at the end of the process—police and local authorities have already gone through the process of setting their budgets when a cap is imposed. They will have gone through the process of different departments deciding their spending priorities, and anyone who is on a fixed-term contract knows that they have a contract. Then, right at the end of the process, the Government threaten to slap a cap on the authority and expect it to somehow remove a large sum from its budget, which undermines the whole planning process.

It is as if we go through a macho charade once a year. The Government refuse to tell local authorities what the cap is and what they are expected to do, and the authorities are supposed somehow to work it out by some process of osmosis or telepathy. When they get it wrong, the Government take draconian action that inevitably results in council tax payers picking up the cost of re-billing, either in future budget cuts or directly. The long-term result is that the relationship between central and local government is utterly undermined.

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on introducing the debate. Derbyshire has been capped in exactly the same way as Surrey, except that we are not having to re-bill this year. We simply have to lose £1.6 million next year and 60 front-line officers in a force that already has 300 fewer police officers than most equivalent authorities.

Will my hon. Friend elaborate on the principle of rate capping and the devolution of power? We hear a lot from the Government about localism and allowing local authorities the freedom to operate, yet they take 90 per cent. of taxation to London before handing it out, with strings, to local authorities, saying, "Your localism and your freedom is to operate within these constraints." That would not happen in France, Germany, Scandinavia or the United States. Local authorities in those places have responsibility: they raise the money and run their local police forces and schools.

Christopher Fraser (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that this is a debate about Surrey. I have allowed the intervention but I am glad that he has sat down.

Sarah Teather: Thank you, Mr. Fraser. My hon. Friend demonstrates that the problem has affected not only Surrey, but other police authorities. The debate allows us to see the direct impact on local people and local views. The problem affects areas other than Surrey.

Sir Paul Beresford: The hon. Lady ought to be aware that although a number of authorities are capped, to the best of my knowledge, mine is the only one that looks as if it will be required to re-bill.

Sarah Teather: The hon. Gentleman is completely correct. Other authorities have been nominated but have not had to go through the process of re-billing, but as my hon. Friend said, no matter where authorities are on the scale, there is a devastating impact on their ability, and the ability of the police authority concerned, to plan for the future and on job security. Of course, the re-billing aspect about which hon. Members spoke seems particularly silly. To recover £1.6 million for a cost of £1.2 million is surely bonkers. I am amazed that the Government cannot see that. That is why I described it as a purposeless macho charade.

My hon. Friend spoke about localism and I spoke about the relationship between central and local government, but almost every hon. Member has spoken about the issue of the police authority in Surrey. The hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) spoke about her town and a number of hon. Members spoke about airports and the problem of the M25 going through Surrey. Normally, when Back Benchers speak about difficulties in their constituency, a Minister stands up and says, "Oh well. It is the duty of Back Benchers to whinge about their constituencies and to make special pleas," but devolution is supposed to devolve power down to the local area because people there know best.

The average local MP, police authority and local authority will know a good deal more about the issues affecting their area than a Government Minister, who may have never been to see what is happening on the ground. That is the nonsense of capping. We are supposed to allow local authorities to set their budgets and priorities because they know best, but central Government come in and slap a cap on them and say, "Actually, you don't know best and we're going to undermine all the priorities that you have set."

The hon. Member for Guildford said that the police authority asked the DCLG for guidance at the end of its budget-setting process, but the DCLG consistently said that it had no firm plans to set a cap. That is silly. I spoke about that following a ministerial statement a few months ago.

I hope that the Conservative spokesperson condemns capping in general. The issue of re-billing in Surrey and the fact that it went right through the system is not the only problem; capping in general is a problem. Central Government use a heavy hand to set priorities that may have little or no impact on the final budget, yet they have a huge impact on the quality of services. I agree with hon. Members who said that if the Government must have some kind of capping system, they need to find a way to avoid re-billing, and that going through a judicial review process, which will cost goodness knows how much more, would utterly undermine any purpose whatever.

Part of the problem for police authorities is that they have no elected mandate. They raise and set taxes, but they are not directly accountable to the people from whom the taxes are raised. That probably allows the Government to do their worst in overruling the authorities' ability to set priorities. I would like police authorities to have some form of directly elected mandate and nomination of local authority representatives. That would give them a much stronger hand and the ability to say to central Government, "Don't interfere in what we're doing. We haven't only consulted; we have a direct mandate to be here and to set our own priorities and budget."

Hon. Members have said that Surrey consulted. From my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes), I know that those in Derbyshire consulted heavily, yet central Government still overruled what the police authority was prepared to do. Some form of elected mandate would help a great deal.

[Mr. Mike Weir *in the Chair*]

Paul Holmes: Many hon. Members from Surrey have commented on the fact that Government inspectors have recognised that the Surrey police authority is very efficient in handling its finances and policing operations. The same is true in Derbyshire. Government inspectors say that Derbyshire is highly efficient and has made £40 million in efficiency savings. Central Government are therefore saying to highly efficient police authorities, "Even though you're very efficient and everybody across your county agrees with what you're doing in raising a bit more money out of council tax to make up for Government underfunding, we're going to cap you and stop you doing that." Where is the logic and the local accountability in that?

Sarah Teather: The truth is that there is no logic and no local accountability whatever.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), who is no longer in his place, accused the Government of petty political vindictiveness, but I am not sure that that is actually the cause. I think that it is simply the case that unless the Government are prepared to wave their stick around at some point in the process of council tax setting, they cannot instil any fear into other local authorities. At least one or two local authorities and police authorities need to be picked off, bullied in public and made an example of so that the Government can continue to claim that they have some authority.

Mr. Wilshire: Would the hon. Lady not describe it as vindictive or suspicious if the Government want to wave that stick about? I agree that they want to make a case of somebody; they are picking on a county where there is not a single Labour MP to complain.

Sarah Teather: It is certainly vindictive, but I am not sure that I give the Government credit for that much thought. I suspect that the process is much more random than that. I think that they merely pick a couple of random councils to make public scapegoats of so that they can claim to have some authority over local authorities.

The fundamental problem, as the Minister well knows, is that council tax is a deeply unpopular tax. That is why the Government need to wave their big sticks around when it comes to budget-setting time—in order to demonstrate that they are doing something about council tax. We all know that council tax rises are above inflation every single year. The tax is felt keenly, particularly by the low-paid, because they know that it is unfair. It is not based on their ability to pay or even on the price of their house. It bears no relationship to whether they own their property and is based on a notional value that is decades out of date. Until the Government are prepared to grasp the whole of local government finance, introduce a system of local taxation based on people's income and ability to pay and devolve power and finance-raising down to local authorities in a serious way, I am afraid that we will go through the same charade every year. It is deeply depressing.

12.3 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate. The fact that so many Surrey MPs have turned up and that they have so eloquently represented their constituents' concerns about the capping of the Surrey police precept demonstrates to the Minister, I hope, how important the issue has become. I welcome him to his new role.

I shall keep my comments as brief as possible, because a lot of questions have been posed and concerns raised, and we now need the Minister to answer them. It seems to me that today's debate involves irony on painful irony. Council tax has doubled under Labour, yet Ministers have made no complaint about it. Different approaches are taken in different parts of the country. The Met precept, charged by the London Mayor, has quadrupled in the past 10 years—it has been frozen, thank heavens, now that we have a new and better Mayor. Again, the Government took no action on that. Yet when Surrey police, which clearly faces a range of challenges on the policing front—perhaps more than most police forces—put a toe out of line, the Government imposed a disproportionate cap that, as we have heard, will cost practically as much to enforce as it will raise.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: Let us be quite clear: it is not Surrey police that put a toe out of line; it is the Government who are out of order.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have heard today that the Surrey police authority has been evaluated by the Audit Commission and rated by residents. People are happy with its performance. The key question that the Government need to answer is who should make the decision. Why should it be the Minister and his Department rather than residents?

Mr. Ian Taylor: That is exactly the point. Why are the Government intervening when the Surrey council tax payer is providing half the funding for Surrey police, Surrey taxpayers are contributing massively to the central Exchequer and the force will have to be reduced by a further 24 officers to pay for the diktat that the Government are imposing centrally?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is right, of course. Only local people can judge the balance of how much they think it is right to invest in policing and what they want in return.

The other irony is how much money is being wasted on regional and local government by Ministers. In the past 10 years, the combined cost of unelected regional assemblies, regional development agencies and Government offices for the regions has risen to £12.8 billion, which is £580 for every household every year. The Government should trim those costs to gain efficiencies before looking to front-line services such as policing.

The hon. Member for Brent, East (Sarah Teather) raised the question of our approach to council tax capping. We would abolish central capping, because we think that residents and local communities should have the ability to cap, if that is what they want and if they decide that what is being proposed is more than they can or are willing to pay. However, that is for local communities to do at a much earlier stage in the process than the last minute. As has been pointed out, we are already in the 2009 financial year, so the savings being forced on Surrey police have been exacerbated. They are not annual savings and will have to be taken over a much shorter period.

We need more local decision making, and with that should come more local accountability from the police. We have discussed our plans to have more local democracy in the form of directly elected police commissioners and the ability for local residents to introduce their own referendums on local issues, if enough of them want to do so, and that should include capping.

I will leave the Minister with a final thought. The question that he must ultimately answer is simple. Why is it for him to decide to cap Surrey police's precept and not for the residents who have been so clearly represented here today by their Members of Parliament?

12.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr. Shahid Malik): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate in your company, Mr. Weir. It appears that half the Opposition Front Benchers have taken the trouble to turn up today to wish me well in my reinstatement as a Minister. I am touched, and I thank them. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this debate, which is our second in the past few weeks.

I should begin by explaining the background of how we got to our present position in relation to Surrey police authority. The Government have made it clear in every year since 2004-05 that we will take capping action against excessive council tax increases. That followed successive years of high increases early in the decade, which happened despite the generous grant increases that authorities received from the Government. That culminated in an average band D increase in England of 12.9 per cent. in 2003-04. Surrey police authority took the opportunity that year to set an increase of 40.1 per cent. I am sure that all hon. Members agree that such increases—

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Malik: I will not give way on many occasions, but I will, of course, give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Paul Beresford: We have been careful to leave time to allow for interventions on the Minister.

The Minister is not correct in saying that there is a real-terms increase for Surrey. There may have been nationally, but there was a negative increase for Surrey, where the figure went down in real terms.

Mr. Malik: I am sure that all hon. Members agree that such increases are totally unacceptable and that we do not want to see such levels again—council tax payers certainly do not want to.

Successive years of grant increases and the use of our capping powers led to the average band D increase in England coming down to just 3 per cent. in 2009-10. The average increase per household this year is even lower. At 2.6 per cent., it is the lowest average increase per household since council tax was introduced by the Conservatives in 1993.

Our involvement with Surrey police authority started just over a year ago. One local authority and several police authorities, including Surrey, set excessive council tax increases in 2008-09. We designated Surrey for capping, but after considering its challenge, decided not to cap it in-year. Instead, we set it a notional budget requirement for that year, which was lower than the budget requirement set by the authority. That meant that the authority was allowed to retain its excessive increases for 2008-09 and did not have to re-bill. Our action in 2008-09 limited Surrey's scope for increases in future financial years. We also gave it an opportunity to avoid setting an excessive increase in 2009-10. Unfortunately, Surrey did not take that opportunity and has set an excessive increase for 2009-10.

Sir Paul Beresford: I have made it clear that during the daily discussions, the Department's lawyers were contacted. Their reply made it quite clear that

"there is no requirement on the Surrey police authority to calculate notional level of Council Tax (based on the notional budget requirement) 2008/09 and Surrey police authority will set their budget requirement and their precept for 2009/10…in the normal way".

There was no mention of the word "notional" until 72 hours before the budget was set.

Mr. Malik: I was going to deal with that point later, but I will deal with it specifically now. It is clearly untrue. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that hon. Members want me to respond. As long ago as October 2008, Surrey was well aware of the implications of its course of action. It was also told about that on several occasions thereafter.

Of 15 authorities that have been set notional budget requirements, Surrey is the first that has gone on to set an excessive increase in the subsequent year. In 2009-10, the Government reiterated to all authorities that they would not hesitate to take capping action against excessive increases. We said explicitly that we would require authorities to re-bill if necessary. In December 2008, the then Minister for Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (John Healey), wrote to all local authorities to make that clear.

Justine Greening: If the Surrey police precept is going up by more than the Minister thinks that it should, but people in Surrey are willing to pay it, why is it anything to do with Whitehall?

Mr. Malik: I will answer that in due course, along with the other points that have been raised.

If the authority is now crying foul because it is faced with re-billing costs, it has only itself to blame. The authority is threatening a judicial review to argue that the Secretary of State does not have the power to set a capping principle by reference to a notional amount of council tax. I will therefore not comment further on that matter. However, it is not the case that the authority was first informed about its 2008-09 notional council tax in January 2009, as has been suggested.

Mr. Ian Taylor: The Minister is talking about the notional precept. I want it on the record that the actual increase in precept levied by Surrey police authority for 2009-10 is 4.89 per cent. That is below the 5 per cent. threshold.

Mr. Malik: Actually, it is above the threshold if taken as a percentage of the notional precept. It is 7.1 per cent.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He said that Surrey police authority "was well aware" in October. He subsequently said that Surrey police authority's claim that it did not know something until January was untrue. He has twice asserted that the information put out by Surrey police authority is incorrect. Will he send the proof of his claims to all who have attended this debate? What was the authority told, by whom, on what date and was that in writing or by e-mail? Will he provide us with copies so that we can sort out who is telling the truth?

Mr. Malik: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not casting aspersions on my good word.

Mr. Wilshire: If I were allowed to, I would.

Mr. Malik: I think that that is inappropriate. I accept the hon. Gentleman's apology even though he has not yet made it.

From October 2008, the Department made it clear to the authority several times that any council tax capping principle in 2009-10 would operate by reference to a notional amount of council tax for 2008-09. Frankly, I do not think that I can be any clearer. If the hon. Gentleman wants me to repeat that point, I can do so for the next 15 minutes, but I do not think that he does.

Sarah Teather: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Malik: No I will not. I will continue.

Perhaps the authority needs to check its records more closely. That is a message that Opposition Members can take back.

Surrey's estimate of the re-billing costs is £1.2million. That looks somewhat on the high side compared with the costs incurred by other authorities. For example, last year Lincolnshire police authority estimated re-billing

costs at about £1 million, whereas the actual cost was £380,000. We will have to wait to see the actual re-billing costs in Surrey.

Mr. Malins: Has the Minister been fully briefed on the contents of my meeting with Lord West? If so, what is his reaction?

Mr. Malik: Having been in this job for five minutes, I apologise that that was not at the top of the priority list for my briefing this morning. I am sure that I will be briefed on that in due course. The hon. Gentleman will understand why I have not had such a briefing.

If we accept Surrey's estimate for the re-billing costs and add it to the £1.6 million budget reduction that it is required to make due to capping, the total is £2.8 million.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Malik: This will be the last time, because I need to make progress.

Sir Paul Beresford: The Minister still has quite a bit of the time that we left him.

Rather than question Surrey, I questioned the billing authority in my area. It said that the cost will be £4.65 per bill. I chose to ask that authority and not Surrey because it is dealing with the matter.

Mr. Malik: It is not for me, nor for anybody in this Chamber, to tell the authority what it should do to live within its cap. However, I note that its papers show that it will have reserves of £9.4 million by the end of 2009-10.

Sarah Teather: I thank the Minister for giving way. He said that police authorities were given notice that they would have to act within a notional precept and that they had been given a firm view of what that precept would be. That is not true. Earlier this year, the then Minister for Local Government said:

"It would be a serious mistake for any local authority to assume that the principles I have announced today for this year are in any way a guide to the approach or the levels I may set in future years." [*Official Report*, 26 March 2009; Vol. 490, c. 465.]

Mr. Malik: As I have said, I shall give full details on that issue in writing.

The authority's papers show that it will have reserves of £9.4 million by the end of 2009-10, of which £5.6 million is not earmarked. It remains a Government priority to keep down the level of council tax increases, and Surrey police authority knew that. It also knew that if it set an excessive increase in 2009-10, it would be at risk of in-year capping and of being required to re-bill.

Mr. Ian Taylor: I am very concerned about something that I think the Minister just said. For the record, again, the general reserves of Surrey police are £5.6 million, which is less than the 3 per cent. in Audit Commission guidance, so raiding that would cause even more concern in any external audit of Surrey police. Surely, the Minister is not advocating that, is he?

Mr. Malik: I am not advocating anything. I am merely pointing out the facts. It is not my job or the job of anyone in the House to manage the financial and operational affairs of any police authority.

Hon. Members: So why are you capping?

Mr. Mike Weir (in the Chair): Order.

Mr. Malik: I will deal with that point. I know that hon. Members are anxious, and I am quite sure that they are being sincere and not politically vindictive, but if they allowed me to respond they might get answers to some of their questions.

The authority knew that if it was excessive in 2009-10, it would be at risk of in-year capping and of being required to re-bill. It also knew that its 2009-10 increases would be compared with notional levels of budget requirement and council tax for 2008-09. Surrey knew all that, but it went on to set an excessive increase.

Paul Holmes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Malik: I will, but this will probably be the last time, because I want to respond to the points that have been made.

Paul Holmes: The Minister keeps referring to notional budgets, but as was pointed out in Derbyshire's judicial review application, there is no provision in legislation for the Government to set notional budgets. I know that Surrey has said the same thing. He also keeps talking about excessive budgets, but the Government have admitted every year since 2006 that Derbyshire police has been underfunded by £5 million, but the extra council tax will raise only £1.6 million. How can that be excessive?

Mr. Mike Weir (in the Chair): Order. I remind the Member that this debate is about Surrey, not Derbyshire.

Mr. Malik: I am more than happy to respond to a debate on Derbyshire in future, but this is not it.

Out of 421 authorities, including 37 police authorities, Surrey is the only one that has ever set an excessive increase for two years in succession. The hon. Member for Mole Valley has had the privilege of serving in government, so he knows that it is not about costs, but about principles. If 420 out of 421 billing and precepting authorities have managed to live within their means and be financially responsible, it would be ludicrous to make an exception in any case. That would send out entirely the wrong message and would set a detrimental precedent that could heap up many problems in both the short and longer term.

I have heard a lot about Surrey being a fountain of wealth creation in the UK, and that it should therefore benefit disproportionately through expenditure on it, but the Government do not believe in redistribution based on the amount of wealth created in an area.

Anne Milton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Malik: I am sorry, but I am not going to give way, so hon. Members should please not bother.

We believe that money and resources ought to go to where there is need, and the last thing that we want to do is create a north-south divide such as that in the 1980s.

Anne Milton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Malik: I will not give way, I am afraid.

Mr. Malins: On a point of order, Mr. Weir. You know that all Surrey MPs who were available to attend today have attended, and that we have made a great number of points, none of which has yet been dealt with. Is it proper for the Minister simply to say, with several minutes to go, that he will not give way at all again? Is that a proper action for a Minister, or should he give way?

Mr. Mike Weir (in the Chair): That is not a point of order. It is not for the Chair to determine how the Minister responds to a debate.

Mr. Malik: The hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) has been here long enough to know that and has, unfortunately, just eaten up even more of my time, leaving me less time to respond to his points.

I accept that much of Surrey police authority is probably excellent, as the hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) has said, but, sadly, its financial arrangements do not fall into that category. I take her point about the Street Angels project, which seems a worthy initiative, and I wish it well.

The hon. Member for Woking spoke at some length about terrorism and counter-terrorism, for which there is a separate budget, which has more than doubled in the past few years because the Government have recognised some of the challenges that the country faces in that regard.

Much has been said about common sense, but there is no more basic common sense than living within one's means. Why can 420 other authorities accept and live within their means, while Surrey cannot? Every one of the 36 other police authorities could have come here and made many of the same arguments, but they have not. I have heard today that they recognise the challenges that budgets impose on them, but they also recognise their responsibility to stay within budget and make reasonable increases. That is common sense to everyone else.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) made some arguments that I simply did not find credible. There were some rather silly and churlish accusations about petty political vindictiveness, but, as I have just explained, this has nothing to do with politics. Surrey is the only billing and precepting authority out of 421 that has gone for excessive increases in two successive years.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank the Minister for giving way in the last few moments. The one thing that we have asked throughout is that there should be the opportunity, with the placing of the order, to designate the capping and set it against next year. That would save an enormous amount of money which the authority would have to find otherwise, whether from balances, with which I would disagree, or in a precept or savings. Is the Minister prepared to reconsider that and lay an order so that re-billing does not have to occur?

Mr. Malik: At this stage, I am not prepared to reconsider, because I think it would be wrong and would set a wholly inappropriate precedent. Surrey had the opportunity to look at things again last year, but it chose to ignore that and now it is paying the price. Even though it knew what the price would be, it is complaining. That is completely inappropriate, and it would be a wrong precedent to set. For that reason, I am pretty sure that I will not reconsider this matter in the way that the hon. Gentleman would like.

We will not have the final word today, however, as the capping of the authority in 2009-10 is subject to the approval of the House of Commons. A draft order to cap it is being laid tomorrow, and we expect the House to debate the order at the end of this month or at the beginning of July. Hon. Members are right to vent their spleen about this, but they ought to vent it at Surrey police authority for not managing its books in the way in which 420 other billing and precepting authorities have been doing.

Extreme Solar Events

12.30 pm

Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley) (Lab): On 23 April 2008, the Select Committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills published its report on science budget allocations. During the course of the Committee's inquiry, we received a number of representations from different scientific bodies about the decision of the Science and Technology Facilities Council to reduce the budget allocation for ground-based solar terrestrial physics to zero. We received evidence from UK Solar Physics research and from the British Academy, but the clearest evidence that we received was from the British Antarctic Survey.

I shall quote two parts of the British Antarctic Survey's evidence, in which it makes a case for not cutting the budget in relation to solar terrestrial physics:

"Sun-climate links: researchers are becoming increasingly aware of links between solar variability and the earth's climate. It is critical that we establish the relative importance of solar-induced effects on climate change so we can predict more accurately the man-made influences on climate. The InterGovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that the current level of understanding is very low and Sir Keith O'Nions in recent evidence to the Public Accounts committee about the Halley research station in Antarctica asserted that the 'physics of the upper atmosphere there will be a very key part of climate change'."

It is therefore an odd decision to cut the budget.

More importantly for the case I want to make, the British Antarctic Survey stated:

"Space weather: solar variability has a very strong influence on the near-earth space environment, including large transient increases in the amount of radiation there. Such space weather events are frequent but intermittent and of varying severity, the prediction of which is an ultimate goal of STP research. They can lead to temporary loss of service from satellites, or even the complete loss of satellites worth about $300 million each. More than half of all space insurance is done through London and is worth $500 million per year."

The Committee went on to make a case for fewer cuts to the budget. The work had not been done, so we could not have known that a month later—on May 22-23—a meeting was held under the auspices of the Space Studies Board about the societal and economic impacts of severe space weather events. Such work comes under the national academies in the United States, which had been called together to discuss the impact of severe space weather. I have heard that National Aeronautics and Space Administration funded the project because it was concerned about the matter. NASA was particularly concerned about what became known as the Halloween storms, which took place in autumn 2003, when there was a large space storm and transformer problems in Sweden. Commercial airline flights were moved away from the Arctic region and the level at which commercial airlines were flying had to be lowered. The advanced earth observing satellite II has not been heard of since; it was damaged beyond repair after that space storm.

At this point, it is worth discussing the definition of space storms, what the likely future impacts might be and how that should be reflected in the Government's response. Space storms are associated with sun spots—a cooling of the sun's surface—which are caused by bursts of magnetic knots from the interior of the sun. Associated with space storms are coronal mass ejections, which are essentially billions of tonnes of plasma composed of protons and electrons that hurl very quickly towards the earth. Coronal mass ejections travel at varying speeds depending on how big and concentrated they are, but they can travel up to 1,500 miles a second. They can travel at a considerable speed and they seem to happen every 11, 12 or 13 years.

The largest such event was known as the Carrington event, which took place just under 150 years ago. The size of that event has since been studied and it turned out to be four times larger than any of the recently measured solar weather events. Richard Carrington was a British scientist and astronomer who first worked out the relationship between sun spot activity and the magnetic phenomena in the earth's atmosphere, such as the aurora borealis, the aurora australis and St. Elmo's fire, which sailors have known about for years. Richard Carrington worked out that such atmospheric magnetic events were related to what was happening on the sun.

The 2003 event—and to a lesser extent the 1989 event, in which 9 million people in Quebec lost power—meant that the body that works with National Academies in the States sat down and discussed what was happening. I know that anyone who talks about space, cataclysmic events and potential disasters is not likely to be taken too seriously, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take the matter seriously. If there were a large solar storm of the strength of Carrington—there is no reason to believe that the event of 150 years ago was as large as space storms can get—there would not only be serious consequences for western society, but all societies that are dependent on current technologies.

There are particular concerns that the magnetic impact of these storms would cause induced currents in step-up and step-down transformers. Direct current would be induced in systems that are meant to deal with alternating currents, which would saturate the magnets at the core of the transformers and melt the copper wire. Such a proposition is not theoretical; it is what happened in Quebec in 1989. The current systems are more vulnerable because, for greater efficiency, modern grids operate at ever higher voltages—for example, the Chinese have recently put in voltage systems that operate at 1,000 V.

When the relevant bodies looked at the situation, they worked out what the impact would be in north America and China. They also said that the inter-dependability of the grids in Europe meant that we could have a serious catastrophe in Europe. For north America, they estimated that within 90 seconds of one of these events, 300 key transformers could go down, affecting 130 million people. The impacts are obvious to anyone who thinks about it: water that needs to be pumped up multi-storey buildings would stop; trains would stop; the underground would stop; and, because we live in a just-in-time society, a lot of industry would stop. It would be very difficult after a few days to get petrol to petrol stations, the back-up generators for hospitals could fail, and we would be in a serious situation.

There have been attempts to estimate the number of back-up transformers, but there are very few. In any case, there are not many crews available to put in new transformers. Nuclear power stations would shut down if the grid went down. The Committee estimated that a Carrington-type event would have 10 times the impact on the United States of the Katrina hurricane a few years ago and would cost that country $2 trillion. That is a large figure, and consequences could be dire.

[Graham Stringer]

When I tabled a parliamentary question, I was told that the Government were aware of the matter and that contingency plans were in place. I would be interested to know the answer to a question about timing. Again, this is covered in the National Academies report. Much of the information about the timing and prediction of such events comes from the ACE satellite—the advanced composition explorer—which can get information to us in about 15 to 30 minutes. However, if the plasma were travelling as fast as it is estimated that it travelled 150 years ago, it would get here in 12 minutes, so the advanced warning would not arrive in time. The other satellite that can provide such information—it was damaged in the last solar storm in 2003—is SOHO, or the solar and heliospheric observatory. It, too, would have difficulty getting the information to us in time.

There have to be particular circumstances for a Carrington event to happen. Solar winds and ejections of plasma happen from time to time, but the most difficult events involve plasma directed straight at the earth. In 2003, the largest ejection just missed the earth. The plasma has to be travelling very quickly, it has to be dense and intense, and finally—this is quite important—its polarity has to be the opposite of the earth's polarity. If it is the same, it just slips past the earth. It is like the difference between a knife going through water and an explosion in water. If plasma with an opposite polarity were to hit the earth's atmosphere, it would cause many problems.

Given that there is no evidence that the current events are as large as they could get, and given the estimates that a large event could have serious consequences, I have two or three questions to ask the Minister. First, was it wise to cut the money going to ground-based solar-terrestrial physics, when one of the objectives is to understand the signs better and to predict events? Secondly, does the Minister agree with the National Academies estimates that the fastest of such storms are not predictable, and, therefore, that it would not be possible to take generators out of the system to protect them, and that we are vulnerable? The consequent question is, if something like that were to happen, are contingency plans in place for transformers and emergency services that go beyond the normal emergency plans that we have in place in this country? I look forward with interest to my hon. Friend's reply.

12.44 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Graham Stringer) on securing this important debate and on giving us an interesting presentation. I am sure that this matter is not well known to most people; none the less, as he said, it is extremely important.

Before I turn to the specific issue of solar storms, I would like to thank my hon. Friend for the wider interest that he has demonstrated in this matter. I am aware of his work on the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee which, as he pointed out, has considered funding for research. In the course of my reply, I shall also expand on the answer provided in response to my hon. Friend's recent parliamentary question on the need to protect the national grid from extreme solar weather.

A recent article in the *New Scientist* raised concerns that a repeat of the Carrington event to which my hon. Friend referred could have a major impact on national electricity transmission networks. It prompted a letter from a concerned constituent of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) and a debate in both the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly. I therefore very much welcome this opportunity to discuss the issue and to explain the Government's view on the risk that we believe is posed to the UK's electricity network, and the measures that are in place to monitor events and mitigate the risks.

National Grid Electricity Transmission owns the England and Wales electricity transmission system, and Scottish Power Transmission Ltd and Scottish Hydro Electric each own part of the transmission system in Scotland. National Grid also has responsibility for overseeing and managing the flow of electricity across the whole of the Great Britain transmission network. My Department maintains close contact with those companies on all network resilience issues.

As my hon. Friend said, satellites are capable of giving several hours' warning that a major solar storm has occurred on the sun, and about 30 minutes' warning that the subsequent discharge could impact on the earth. The information is available in real time to National Grid, which has procedures in place that set out the actions that would be taken should such an alert be received.

There is also an international research programme to improve understanding of the potential impact of solar storms. It is led by the Electric Power Research Institute based in the USA, to which my hon. Friend referred, and National Grid is a partner in that research. The programme monitors the ongoing low-level solar storms that are detected from time to time by satellites and correlates them with measurements of induced currents on the ground as detected by monitors placed around the globe. In that way, we are gaining experience in interpreting early warning signs of solar storms.

My hon. Friend asked whether it was wise to cut the budget. I shall write to my relevant opposite numbers and make an inquiry further to his inquiry. I am not in a position to make a judgment, but I would say to him that, as in so many such matters, the international scientific endeavour is most important. As the UK Government, and through the partnership of National Grid with the US institute, we are able to obtain up-to-the-minute, appropriate science.

Graham Stringer: I am grateful for that response, and I realise that this debate covers several departmental responsibilities. Would my hon. Friend make the point to her colleagues that while international collaboration may deal with some of the details and with development of policy, there is a real economic importance to work going on in this country because of the insurance industry in the City?

Joan Ruddock: I will certainly look at that and make the specific connection that my hon. Friend just made.

The procedures that National Grid and other utilities have in place for reacting to a major solar flare include steps to increase the generation reserves that can improve

voltage levels across the network, and possibly switching out certain transformers at the edge of the network if sufficient information is available to give confidence in the route that the electrical currents caused by the solar storm will take.

My hon. Friend asked whether I agree that the fastest storms would not be predictable. It is a fact that, if something occurs at a speed that we are not able to pick up in the networks that already exist—in the satellite messaging systems that we depend on—we would be taken by surprise. Generally, however, through satellites, we are certainly getting information within a reasonable time frame. All transformers connected to the national grid transmission network since 1999 have been designed to eliminate the risk of damage presented by solar storms. That answers my hon. Friend's question about more modern facilities with higher voltages. Protection has been built in and there is an acceptance that, as voltages have increased, there is a need to introduce appropriate safeguards.

Of course, a wide range of incidents and emergencies might have an impact on all or significant parts of the UK. The national risk register, published in March 2008, sets out the Government's assessment of the likelihood and impact of a range of different risks that may directly affect the UK over the next five years, including accidents such as major fires or technical failures, natural events, including severe weather and flooding, and particularly the threat of international terrorism. Comprehensive plans are in place for handling both a complete national outage of electricity supplies, which, of course, has never occurred, I am glad to say, and regional outages. Although solar storms are not included specifically in the national risk register, the resilience measures in place to deal with the risks I have mentioned would be equally applicable to the effects of solar storms.

As my hon. Friend said, solar storms approximately follow an 11-year cycle and are thought to be related to changes in the sun's magnetic field. We are in a quiet phase at present and the latest information from NASA is that the next peak is likely during mid 2013. My hon. Friend hoped that I would take this matter seriously. Indeed, the Government do take it seriously. Solar storms are known to be capable of damaging electricity transmission networks on earth and this has happened, as he said, in both Canada and Sweden. The most significant event occurred on 13 March 1989, when a severe storm caused the collapse of the Canadian Hydro-Québec power grid in a matter of seconds. As he said, millions of people were left without power for nine hours, with significant economic loss. In the UK, there have been at least four peak cycles of solar storms during the existence of modern high-voltage transmission networks. Generally, these have caused no problems, although in 1989 two transformers suffered damage: one in East Anglia and one in the west country. However, in both cases, the impact was limited to the locality.

I am glad to say that the UK is not at a particularly high risk of disruption from solar storms, as we are a good way south of the magnetic north pole. The history of extreme solar weather events and the science indicate that the risk of a major impact in the UK is very low. Although the UK may not be completely immune from the impact of solar storms, it is extremely unlikely that we would suffer widespread damage. The damage that could occur is therefore small and well within the scope of the resilience and contingency planning that we have in place to deal with terrestrial weather events and other risks that could impact on the electricity networks.

The main risk to electricity supplies during a severe solar storm is that one or more transformers at the edge of the network could be damaged, which would cause a localised loss of supply if the capacity of remaining transformers could not deliver all the demand for electricity in that area. Generally, a damaged transformer can be replaced within about two weeks and it is often possible to take other measures to restore supplies much quicker than that, including an early return to service of equipment being maintained or the re-routing of supplies from a different location.

The highest risk areas of the UK are the west country and parts of Scotland, due to the granite rock formation of the ground in those parts. That type of ground is particularly susceptible to electrical currents, so the geomagnetically induced currents caused by the solar storm are therefore more likely to find a path through the electricity networks. That is more likely to happen because of the terrain in those areas.

A severe solar storm can also depress the overall voltage of the transmission network by a few per cent. However, that is unlikely to cause damage or disruption and defence measures can be taken to reduce the risk even further. For example, National Grid may be able to increase the number of electricity generators on the network to help support the voltage.

These impacts are comparable to the risks faced by the transmission networks in day-to-day operation, for example, by the breakdown of generation or transmission equipment or through the terrestrial weather events that I mentioned earlier. The ability to cope with such events and minimise their impact is built into the design of the networks, operating procedures and the resilience measures available to the grid operators. Emergency planning arrangements are also in place to cover significant and unexpected events.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The Department of Energy and Climate Change maintains its capacity to lead the response to energy emergencies and incidents. That means planning, training and exercising alongside those likely to have a stake in a potential crisis. That includes the energy sector, together with local, regional and devolved Administrations, as well as other Departments and agencies whose interests may be affected and whose assistance would be needed.

Although there are clearly uncertainties about the impact of a major solar storm, experience to date indicates that the UK is not unduly exposed to such events and, in the worst case, it could be expected that any interruption to electricity supplies would be localised and of relatively short duration. However, as my hon. Friend implied, there is no absolute certainty in this regard. There is clearly a need for continuing scientific research. We cannot be certain: although we have seen events of a certain nature and events for which we could make reasonable predictions, and although we have in place a significant range of measures that are capable of coping with and, to some degree, mitigating the potential effects on our electricity networks, none the less we need

[Joan Ruddock]

to keep such matters under review. The Department needs to be constantly apprised of, and must follow, developments in science.

The resilience and defensive measures that network owners take to protect against terrestrial weather events are equally applicable in dealing with solar storms. Where specific measures are appropriate, such as the development of reliable early warning systems, work is in hand to improve our understanding. I am confident that we can, as a country, cope within the range of what we know has happened in other parts of the world and in this country, and which may happen here in future.

Some hon. Members may be concerned about the Olympics—a major event in this country—which could conceivably be affected if such a storm were to happen, but I say to my hon. Friend, although he did not raise this issue, that we have considered that and we expect that all the measures that I have described to be in place and to be appropriate. We have contingency arrangements for that major national event. However, we are not complacent on these issues. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important matter in this debate.

Home Education

1 pm

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I recognise that the Minister is making her debut here, and that this matter is work in progress for her Department. I contacted her civil servants, and made it clear that the bulk of this half-hour debate will be taken up by my contribution, but that my hon. Friend the Member for St. Albans (Anne Main) and the hon. Member for St. Ives (Andrew George) may wish to intervene.

In the middle of January, the Department for Children, Schools and Families launched an independent review of home education by Graham Badman, the former director of children and educational services at Kent county council. Mr. Badman has been charged with investigating the current system for supporting and monitoring home education, and was asked to consider how any concerns about children's safety, welfare or education are dealt with. From the outset, the Government have emphasised that they have no plans to change parents' well-established right to educate their children at home.

All that sounds harmless enough, and in light of recent child abuse cases it is little wonder that the Government want to safeguard children who are not visibly in the system, and to keep tabs on parents. It is right for any Government to want evidence that each and every child receives a suitable education, and genuine home educators have nothing to fear. However, the message coming loud and clear from home educators in my constituency is that that hype should not be believed. Their worry is that the Government are manipulating current anxiety about child abuse to intrude further into home education when they have little legal right to do so.

The latest review will mark the third such consultation pertaining to home education over the past four years. Any action stemming from it could affect the balance of power between civil liberties and state intervention, whether one is innocent until proven guilty or guilty until proven innocent, and whether the state or parents have ultimate responsibility for their children. The ability to be free from an all-knowing, all-seeing state's ideas of education, welfare and standards forms the fundamental appeal for many of those who choose home education for their children. Any attempt to alter what is very much a matter of balance would undermine the entire ethos of education.

I became interested, involved and engaged in home education some months back when I met two articulate and passionate local mothers in the Pimlico area of my constituency who had decided to educate their children themselves. One made that decision as a result of her son's unhappy and unproductive first 18 months in the state school sector. The other had seen home education work brilliantly for family friends, and made the positive decision to take on that task for her daughters. The matter is a Cinderella area, and I approached my meeting with those two mothers with some standard misconceptions that a home education might produce an unsocialised, precocious child who is unable to interact with their peers and perhaps shielded from all negative experiences. However, the more I listened to the two mothers, the

more impressed and excited I was by their passion and enthusiasm for home education. Each was able to provide an individualised learning experience tailored to the child's abilities and interests. Far from having an isolated and insulated existence, the children of those two mothers frequently attended classes with other home schoolers, interacted with children of different ages and abilities, and experienced a wide range of activities from practising judo and learning Japanese to visiting galleries and museums during quieter times of day.

Anne Main (St. Albans) (Con): My hon. Friend's experience is replicated in my constituency where there are 60 home schoolers. That has come to the forefront in my constituency because some parents are deeply unhappy about the school that they have been allocated and are investigating home schooling. It is a resourceful way of proceeding with a valuable education that is tailored to their child's needs. I echo what my hon. Friend is saying. When one looks into the matter, one sees that it is a heartening way forward and can be complementary to the state system.

Mr. Field: I thank my hon. Friend for her observations. I stress that the notion of a homogenous group of home educators with a single mind could not be further from the truth. Diversity is one of the most important aspects of the home education ideal and the education that is provided for those children who have the great benefit of it. A home-educated child will naturally have a close relationship with their parents, whose lives are often enriched by learning new skills and knowledge alongside their children.

I have discovered that in my constituency, in the heart of the biggest city in our nation, there is an active community of home educators who share classes and co-ordinate their knowledge base. A nationwide lively online community shares best practice and experience, and I have learned about that from the inundation of information to my private office during the past three or four days since it became known that I was having this debate today. I apologise that I will not be able to make all the points that were made to me by interested parents. Many home educators choose not to engage with other families, and the appeal of home education is that individual educational experience can be tailored to best suit the child and the family.

All that comes at no cost to taxpayers because the vast majority of home educators shoulder not only the teaching burden, but the financial one. Despite that, the choice for many home educators is often not the ability to afford such a route—many probably struggle to some extent—but stems from lack of faith in what the state sector provides, particularly when the basis of that provision is "take it or leave it". That is a problem not so much in my constituency, but in other parts of London where many parents are dissatisfied when only their third, fourth or fifth choice of school is available for their children. Home educators come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and many find that home schooling is the most workable or perhaps the only alternative to expensive school fees or an unattractive local state school.

Unfortunately, both the mothers to whom I spoke at length were deeply concerned about the future of home education. There is long-standing suspicion that the Government, both local and national, are uncomfortable about parents providing education that cannot be monitored, tested or accounted for. There is a real fear that the Government, under the banner of child protection, will try to interfere with the freedom of choice of home educators. I represent a big flagship Conservative borough, but the same probably applies to the local education authority, which is equally to blame. I am not making a partisan party political point. The freedom that is so fiercely guarded by the majority of home educators and their choice to pursue that path is due to a fundamental rejection of the state's values, and lack of faith in the state's ability to provide a suitable education for their child.

Home education has been under constant scrutiny since the Children Act 2004, which enshrined the Government's Every Child Matters agenda in legislation. Draft guidelines clarifying the rights and responsibilities for home educators and local authorities were drafted and debated in early 2005, shelved for two years, and finally published in autumn 2007. That consultation caused great anxiety among home educators because it was feared that the Government would try to introduce inspections and to control the curricula. Eventually, guidelines issued after the review maintained the previous position, and most families were incredibly relieved.

Meanwhile the Education and Inspections Act 2006 introduced new duties for identifying children who were missing education. Yet there was another consultation in autumn last year on children missing education, and all home educators will eventually be tracked down as a result of the ContactPoint database. Local authorities will be required to determine

"as far as they are able"

whether a child is receiving what a local education bureaucrat deems is a suitable education. Before that, local authorities were required only to make a note of any families whom they found home educating.

All this casts doubt on the Government's motives with the Badman review, particularly as the consultation response time has been cut from 12 weeks to four. Why have they not given the latest guidance a chance to work through? Could it be that the consultation is a knee-jerk reaction from a Government who are fearful of any further culpability in the face of some quite deep failings in the care system?

Home educators with whom I have engaged conclude that either the Government have no faith in the previous reviews or this is a superficial exercise to try to allay public concern—a bid to make good other failures with frenetic activity—which will result in few or no changes.

Andrew George (St. Ives) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a very strong case. He says that there may be public concern about this sector, but having visited a group of home educators in Penzance in my constituency, it was clear to me that in many cases these people have chosen this option precisely because they want to escape abuse and bullying in schools. Some choose it for other reasons. In a letter dated 19 June 2007 that I received from the then Under-Secretary in the Department, Lord Adonis, he made it clear that under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 the powers already exist to intervene in cases in which the state believes that a child may suffer harm. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The state already has the powers to intervene where it suspects that harm may be going on.

Mr. Field: That is a very valid point and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has brought it up. There is obviously passion about this issue not just in big cities or suburban conurbations, but in the depths of the far south-west of England. It is probably worth stressing—I appreciate that in many ways the hon. Gentleman made this point—that the issue is not simply children who are being bullied dropping out of the system. It is much wider. Home education is a choice of parents for the good of the children, and one should always trust the instincts of parents rather than the instincts of a bureaucrat in the local education department or of the state as a whole. I am talking about parents' instincts about what is best for their children. One interesting point, which has been very evident, is that home education is not necessarily something that all the children in a family will go through. Parents may make the choice that particular children are best suited to home education and that their other children will go down a much more conventional path by going to school.

People unfamiliar with the ethos behind home education might question the defensiveness of some who home educate: "Why not let the Government in if there is nothing to hide?" Of course, that refrain has seen many other freedoms cast aside over the past decade or so. Independence to pursue the choice that is right for a particular child at the speed at which that child wishes to learn is the cornerstone of home education. Home educators opted out of the system by and large because they lacked confidence in the idea of a very strict and regulated state system. That is something that has been apparent for quite some time—20 or 30 years. I am talking about the rise of the national curriculum and ever more testing, which are, understandably, concerns.

So sacred is the independence of home educators that for a long time they have remained under the radar. However, they now feel compelled to put forward their case, as they have little faith in the review process that is currently being undertaken—I think that the Badman report will come through in the next few weeks—and what it is trying to achieve. Indeed, very few believe that it will produce anything but the "right" result in terms of what the Government now seek. As one home educator told me, "They keep asking us for our views and when we don't give them the right answer they come back and ask again." It seems to be a function of Government all too often—not just in the education sphere but beyond—that they look at individuals who are not doing the conventional, standard thing. I therefore want to ensure that home educators' concerns are firmly put on the record.

It is important to clarify the law when it comes to education. The Human Rights Act 1998 states:

> "In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions."

The Government have a right only to ensure that the education that the state, predominantly via local government, provides is of good quality, and the authorities can intervene only when people are seen to be breaking the law. It is for the same reason that police do not routinely visit people's homes to check for stolen property. Therefore, there is an overwhelming case that home educators should be allowed to get on with their lives without undue state interference.

Unfortunately, local authorities have become increasingly confused about what is law and what is merely Government guidance. I believe that much of the confusion arises from the Government's Every Child Matters agenda, in which issues of education, health and welfare have been conflated. Home educators are deeply concerned about that. The Every Child Matters outcomes are to be healthy, to stay safe, to enjoy and achieve, to make a positive contribution and to achieve economic well-being. The Government have naturally found it rather difficult to ensure that that agenda is being applied by parents in choosing to home educate a child.

On launching the latest consultation, the Government suggested that local authorities and children's organisations had expressed concern about the current system's ability adequately to support and monitor the education, safety and well-being of home-educated children. That fits with a growing body of evidence from home educators that they are more regularly encountering social workers, who turn up, often unannounced, to make demands: evidence of class timetables, written work and so on. In considering forced marriage, the Select Committee on Home Affairs has also raised the fear that home schooling might be used as a cover for something more sinister.

However, home educators vigorously reject the attempts by the Government to mix concerns about child welfare into any review of home education. They believe that the Government's concerns in that regard are in line with the misunderstanding that a child is safe when seen once or twice by a local authority. Furthermore, home educators feel that once the proposition has been made that home education can be used as a cover for child abuse, the onus of proof has shifted on to them to prove their innocence. That is not in any way desirable.

Many home educators believe that the mixing of agendas stems partly from a fundamental misunderstanding of how they school their children. Much of the Government involvement in this area has linked work on uncovering hidden children to home education. In reality, very few home-educated children are hidden, as much of their education is conducted outside the home. Home-educated children are normally seen by a wide range of adults and children: education officers at museums, other home educators, private tutors and normal contacts such as GPs, librarians and youth group leaders.

I am not diminishing in any way legitimate concerns about child abuse. I have a great deal of sympathy for the Government in the very difficult task that they face in preventing cases similar to the appalling ones that we have heard about recently. However, we must be clear. Local authorities, as the hon. Member for St: Ives pointed out, already have powers to get involved in a family when there are concerns about abuse. Admittedly the processes involved can sometimes fail, but that is not the fault of the home educator. It is for Government to re-examine social services procedures if there are concerns.

The uncomfortable truth is that no amount of legislation will ever remove all risk. The task of Government is to balance the rights of all individuals. Given that home-educated children are not proven to be at any greater risk, it is inappropriate to throw away the liberty of parents, even in part, to choose how to educate their child, particularly when it is equally possible for a child to go to school and be abused when they return home or for children in the care of the state to suffer abuse.

With regard to the other aspirations in the Every Child Matters agenda, home educators contend that they are far more likely to fulfil the Government's objectives than the state system. Home education is personalised, child led and free from some of the detrimental effects of curriculum constraints, constant testing and standardisation. Home-schooled children can learn autonomously, often spend more time on physical activity and can learn in an environment free from bullying and peer pressure. Many studies have shown that, regardless of socio-economic background, home-educated children consistently outperform school-educated children.

The Government, however, regularly fail to fulfil the Every Child Matters objectives. The number of pupils achieving grades A* to C in GCSE exams remains only 57.1 per cent. Well-being surveys point to mental dissatisfaction in many children in our country. As the Minister will be aware, the UK was ranked in the bottom third for five of the six dimensions in UNICEF's report on childhood in industrialised countries only last year.

Against such a background, it is perhaps not surprising that in Essex, for example, even the county council, as the education authority, accepts that home education can be a safer bet. Six families there will be paid a little over £10,000 each to educate their children at home because the parents have refused to send their children to what are universally regarded as failing schools in Clacton-on-Sea.

I could say quite a lot more, and I appreciate that I have taken rather more time than I have given the Minister. That is simply because we are waiting for the Badman review, and it would be invidious to expect her to half-guess what it will say or to announce anything that might prejudge it. I am sure that we will return to many of these issues once the review is in place and the ever-vigilant community of home educators has its say on some of the proposals in the review.

It is difficult firmly to say what, if anything, home educators want from the Government. By definition, the community is very diverse, and it is impossible for every home-educating parent to speak with one voice; indeed, it is rather desirable that they have no wish to do so. However, most in the community simply wish to defend their independence, and they reject any attempt by national or local government to impose the state's values on them and their children.

With one review after another in recent years, home educators are frustrated, and the majority feel that the Government are incapable of trusting parents to do the best for their children. Yes, parents do fail sometimes, but so, too, do the Government. We cannot prevent all cases in which a child is abused or not given a decent education; indeed, such cases happen just as often—in fact, rather more often—when the state is involved. It is for Governments to assess risk and to ask which areas warrant more attention.

Increased intervention makes little financial sense and has the potential to divert resources from truly vulnerable children. It also further infringes the rights of parents to make the best decisions for their children. Current legislation is perfectly adequate, but poorly understood. The Government must guard parents' sacred right to educate their children, while vigorously tightening the current system of child welfare. After that, the Government should look at their own ability to fulfil the Every Child Matters objectives, rather than continue to pursue those who put their faith, time and passion into home education.

1.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Ms Diana R. Johnson): I thank the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) for his understanding remarks about where we are with the review and about my position. I congratulate him on securing this short debate and I thank other hon. Members for their contributions.

The Government are committed to building a world-class education system for our children. That system must be built on the highest standards of teaching, real choice for parents and pupils, and rigorous accountability. Home education is a vital part of that system. This debate draws out two important themes, which must be held in balance. One is the right of parents to decide what is best for their children in their education and development. The other is the right of every child to receive a high standard of education in a safe, secure environment.

At present, in England, we have a system that takes great account of the rights of parents to choose an education for their child that

"is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions".

However, every child has the fundamental right to receive an education, and we need to ensure that that important human right is delivered for every child in the land, even in those rare cases where their parents' convictions conflict with their right to be educated.

Mr. Mark Field: What convictions would conflict with the right to education? Would it be any convictions, or do the Government see specific convictions as problematic?

Ms Johnson: It would be rather extreme convictions. It would be a very small number of parents who did not want their children to be educated. It would be a very extreme belief or philosophy that made them follow that path, and the state would, rightly, have to take a view.

We must also ensure that children have the opportunity freely to express their views about the education that they receive, in line with the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. That is a difficult balancing act, and Graham Badman's review is considering it carefully. There can be no question but that we need to ensure that every child receives a good and safe education, and the hon. Gentleman highlighted that in much of his speech.

Let me turn now to the benefits of home education. Home education is a well-established part of our education system. Where it works, and where it is the best option for a child, there are great benefits. It is the ultimate form of personalised learning, with provision tailored to a child's specific needs and with a real opportunity for the child's views and voice to be heard. It also demonstrates real engagement by parents in their child's learning, which is something that we are trying to encourage more consistently across the national picture, whatever educational setting children are in. Furthermore,

[Ms Diana R. Johnson]

the sense of community that the hon. Gentleman describes between home educators in his constituency is something that we want to see in other educational provision, with partnerships between providers, the sharing of resources in communities and the maximising of the opportunities available to young people.

The vast majority of home educators do an excellent job, and the examples that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for St. Albans (Anne Main) cite from their constituencies are clearly testament to that. Let me be clear from the outset that the Government recognise the valuable contribution made by home education, and we certainly do not seek to abolish it.

On the review, the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster is wrong to say that home education has been consistently under scrutiny since 2004. We first issued guidance on the issue in 2007, clarifying the role and obligations of parents and local authorities. The guidance brought together the statutory requirements and the roles and obligations of parents and local authorities, as well as the Department's view on how those should be interpreted in practice. There were no new requirements, and local authorities and home educators told us that it was helpful to bring everything together in one place so that everyone involved in home education could refer to it.

The duty to identify children who are missing education, which was introduced by the Education and Inspections Act 2006, was not a duty to identify home educators. Its purpose was far broader: to identify children who are receiving no education at all. Children who are home educated will inevitably be identified where they are not known to local authorities, but provided that they receive a suitable education, there is no reason why the new duty should have any impact on them or their parents. I think that the hon. Gentleman accepts that we need to do everything we can to ensure that children do not go missing from the education system. I hope that he will support our efforts to ensure that all children attend school regularly or receive a good-quality home education.

Graham Badman's review of home education was set up for a number of reasons. It is looking at the barriers to local authorities and other public agencies safeguarding home-educated children, as well as at ensuring that their safety, well-being and broader development are nurtured along with their academic achievement. It is also looking at the extent to which home education might be being used as a cover for child abuse, at whether local authorities are providing the right support to home-educating families and at whether any changes are needed to the processes for monitoring the standard of home education.

In November 2007, we issued guidance on home education to local authorities, but clarity about roles and responsibilities has still not been achieved. The responses from home educators and local authorities to the consultation on the guidance only underlined the polarised views on this matter. It is clear that further clarity is needed. The underpinning principles behind the criteria for the review are therefore not sinister. They are sensible and simple. They are intended to ensure that everybody involved in home education—local government, central Government and parents—is clear about their responsibilities and that there are clear lines of accountability. They are also intended to achieve greater national consistency in providing suitable full-time education for all children and to ensure that, where there are problems, safeguards are in place to detect them and to allow us to intervene quickly.

Graham Badman wanted to ensure that he took account of all the evidence that could be gathered, and that is why he made a public call for evidence. Reference was made to the 12-week consultation period being shortened to four weeks, but we are talking about a review, not a formal Government consultation. That is why there is a little uncertainty about the 12-week period. Home education is a vital part of the education system. The review is—

Mr. Mike Weir (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that we have come to the end of the time for the debate.

Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs

1.30 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on his appointment, which is richly deserved. I was rather surprised myself this morning when my office told me that the man from No. 10 had been on the phone. In fact it was the man from No. 10 in a particular road in my constituency, who wanted to talk to me about his long-standing drainage problems.

The idea for this debate originated in parliamentary discussions I chaired earlier this year, under the banner of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, with a visiting delegation from the United Arab Emirates. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Sir Nicholas Winterton) is present today, because he took a big part in the discussions, which lasted two or three hours and were very fruitful. Subsequently I received an invitation from the Speaker of the Federal National Council to visit the United Arab Emirates and have further discussions. My accommodation was paid for during that visit by the Mashreq bank and I have made the necessary declarations in the Register of Members' Interests.

During those parliamentary discussions, we ranged over a large number of different topics. The historical links between our two nations are of course very close. Today 120,000 British nationals live and work in the United Arab Emirates. I am told that there are about 1 million British visitors a year. There are very many business links. Obviously, Barclays bank is much in the news at the moment. Those business interests have expanded from the oil and energy sectors to the finance sector in recent years. There are many sporting and cultural links. For example, the main English language newspaper in the Gulf is edited by a former editor of *The Daily Telegraph* and citizens of Abu Dhabi have a particular interest in Manchester City's results. Equally, our defence interests are strong. Our defence co-operation agreement represents the UK's largest defence commitment outside NATO. The UAE is our largest export market in the middle east for non-military goods.

I could have concentrated my remarks on any of those aspects of our relations, but I decided to focus the debate on the issue of the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. The delegation from the Federal National Council was keen to impress on the UK Parliament the importance of the islands and the part that they play in political debate in both the United Arab Emirates and the wider Gulf. I checked up, and the last time the issue was raised in the House was when Edward Heath was Prime Minister in 1971. It was in that debate of December 1971 that figures such as Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the Foreign Secretary at that stage, Jeremy Thorpe and Roy Hattersley all gave the House the benefit of their opinions. Having researched some of the history, I decided that it was about time that the subject got another little airing; so this is the story.

Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb are three small but strategic islands located along the narrow route through the Gulf into the straits of Hormuz and out into the gulf of Oman. Much of the Gulf's oil exports and its non-oil imports pass along that route, as do naval vessels entering and exiting the Gulf. Indeed, a fifth of the world's oil supplies pass through the straits of Hormuz. About 15 million barrels per day, equivalent to Europe's daily consumption, pass through the mouth of the Gulf in tankers that must slow down to navigate a hairpin turn in waters 35 miles wide at the straits' narrowest point. In addition, a number of the Gulf's offshore oil and gas fields are located in the vicinity.

In the early to mid-18th century, the three islands were used on a seasonal basis by Arab tribes dependent on, and loyal to, the Qawasin, a clan based in Ras al-Khaimah. The islands were a source of fresh water and refuge from bad weather and political trouble—a sort of Chequers in the Gulf, really. The Abu Musa island is only 12 sq km. Abu Musa is the name of both a town and an island. It has a population of around 500, and is notable for its golden sandy beaches. The nearby Greater and Lesser Tunbs derive their title from the word "Tunb", which is an Arab word meaning a long rope used to erect a tent. The Greater Tunb has a surface area of 10 sq km and is known for its red soil. The Lesser Tunb has a surface area of 2 sq km and is uninhabitable.

There is, inevitably, a complex story to be told in the region, but in essence it appears that successive UK Governments unequivocally endorsed the claims of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah to Abu Musa and the two Tunbs respectively while those kingdoms were under British protection in terms of the 1892 treaties with the Trucial States. Iran did not accept those claims. However, following the decision in 1968 to withdraw British forces from the Gulf, while formally upholding the "Arab claims", successive UK Governments in practice focused on trying to achieve a peaceful, compromise resolution of the territorial disputes as part of Britain's legacy.

Once Iran knew that Britain was departing it made a variety of claims, all the more forcefully, for a variety of territories in the Gulf. For example, the Government of Iran put forward a claim for the whole of the island of Bahrain. In the wake of a referendum on Bahrain under United Nations supervision, Iran was obliged to abandon its claim. It promptly revived its dormant claim to Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. Ultimately, the then Conservative Government were unable to secure a deal for all three islands in 1971. That proved achievable only with regard to Abu Musa. Iran and Sharjah agreed to a joint administration of Abu Musa, without prejudice to their competing territorial claims. The late Sheikh Khalid Mohammed, who was the ruler of Sharjah at that time, said:

> "I had spent about two years collecting documents proving that the island is Arab territory, and that it belongs to Sharjah. I had asked a team of jurists to prepare legal documents and papers. These were presented to the Iranian Government. However, the logic of force and threat allowed no room for reason and legitimate proofs...Several factors contributed to the delicacy of the situation, combining to form significant pressure...Thus, after consultations with brothers, I deemed it appropriate to seek a formula that would freeze the problem politically, while dealing with it economically. Hence came the said agreement."

Iran then seized Greater and Lesser Tunbs by an amphibious assault using hovercraft in the very last hours of the British protectorate and just before the coming into existence of the United Arab Emirates. One Arab policeman and three Iranians were killed. Richard Mobley, in an interesting article in *Naval War*

[Mr. John Grogan]

College Review in autumn 2003, said of the period leading to the creation of the United Arab Emirates that

"the United Kingdom, on behalf of the emirates of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, asserted that all three islands were Arab territory. London explicitly backed Sharjah's claim to Abu Musa and Ras Al Khaimah's claim to the Tunbs. With its security obligations scheduled to lapse by the end of 1971, however, Great Britain attempted to resolve the islands dispute while fostering the creation of the new United Arab Emirates."

I now want to make a brief reference to the exchanges in the House that I have referred to already, which followed the invasion of the Tunbs in December 1971. Sir Alec Douglas-Home stated on 6 December:

"Once the decision to withdraw our forces from the Gulf and to end our special treaty relationships with the Gulf States was taken, it was inevitable that these long dormant disputes would come into the open. Our aim has therefore been to settle these issues where possible, so that they would not drag on, generating suspicion and hostility in the future."

Jeremy Thorpe then asked a question. He said that

"when the Tunbs were invaded we were still under treaty obligations to Sharjah. As a result of that, is it our intention to use our good offices between the Sheikh of Sharjah and the Shah of Iran to bring about some amicable settlement? Does he accept that we have continuing political obligation in that connection?"

Roy Hattersley then spoke:

"The right hon. Gentleman"—

the then Secretary of State—

"said that so far as the sovereignty of the Tunbs and Abu Musa is concerned the issue remains open. Is that the view of the Government of Iran or is it the Foreign Secretary's view?"—[*Official Report*, 6 December 1971; Vol. 827, cc. 944 to 949.]

What happened next? Diplomatic relations were established between Iran and the United Arab Emirates in October 1972. On 5 October 1972, a statement was read to the 27th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in which the UAE reaffirmed its sovereignty over the islands. A similar statement was read out before the Security Council on 20 February 1974; and a third statement was read to the UN Special Political Committee on 19 November 1974. In 1980, the UAE joined five other nations to form the GCC—the Gulf Co-operation Council.

Throughout the 1980s, the dispute over the islands was overshadowed by the Iran-Iraq war. The Iranians began encroaching beyond the assigned area for their presence in Abu Musa by constructing roads and an airport, and other civilian and military installations. In 1987, they moved troops to the southern side of Abu Musa. In late 1991, Iran imposed restrictions on third-party citizens wishing to enter the UAE zone of Abu Musa by requiring entry permits. The UAE rejected that measure, so in April 1992, Iran ordered all foreigners off the island. Those foreigners ran the UAE-sponsored school, medical clinic and power-generating station. Iran took full control of the island.

After the UAE had taken the matter to the GCC in September 1992, Iran declared full sovereignty over the islands. However, the dispute was temporarily resolved when Iran and Sharjah agreed to abide by the 1971 agreement. When Iraq made threatening moves towards Kuwait in October 1994, Iran increased its military presence on Abu Musa. When the crisis subsided, Iranian troops remained on the island and surface-to-air missiles and anti-ship missiles were deployed. American Secretary of State for Defence Perry noted that Iran had deployed chemical weapons in the Gulf, particularly on Abu Musa.

Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, which is critical and on a matter of great principle. He referred to the distinguished UAE delegation that visited the United Kingdom earlier this year, and to our discussions about the three disputed islands. Does he believe that the islands belong to the Arabs, and that the United Kingdom Government should make it extremely clear to the Governments of the UAE that we will support them in every possible way in seeking to bring about a peaceful conclusion?

Mr. Grogan: As always, the hon. Gentleman cuts to the quick. Having studied their history, I agree that the UAE has a strong case for claiming the islands. If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I shall suggest a way forward in my closing remarks.

Tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbours have a long history. Despite that, however, there are many modern-day ties between the UAE and Iran. For example, the UAE is Iran's main trade partner. The director general of the trade planning office of Iran's trade development organisation has said that Iran's exports to the UAE have been on the rise, with an average growth rate of 27.8 per cent.

Earlier this month, the Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates hailed the advancing trade ties between Iran and the UAE, saying that the two sides enjoyed "deep-rooted and amicable relations". He reiterated that the UAE will never interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, particularly Iran, and said that he always stresses the importance of improving ties with all countries. He expressed hope that the middle east would be free from weapons of mass destruction but supported Iran's peaceful use of nuclear power for energy.

Sheikh Mohammed said that disputes

"over national borders have never prevented trade and human exchange".

He also said:

"Trade relations between any two nations always lead to better relations and facilitate the resolution of conflicts."

The commentator Hassan al-Alkin put it another way. He noted that the UAE

"has pursued a policy of peace co-existence with Iran, hoping that the development of good relations would inevitably lead to the settlement of contentious problems."

On 23 May 2009, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Mohammed Gargash, gave more detail on the approach of the UAE to the three disputed islands. He said that his country wants to resolve the issue through direct talks or international arbitration. At a side-meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Damascus, Gargash said:

"The Emirates want to resolve the occupied islands problem with neighbouring Iran".

He continued:

"Unfortunately despite the passage of more than three decades I cannot remember there having been any positive issues in that respect".

In recent times, there have been a number of statements of support from the international community in favour of referring the issue to the International Court of Justice at The Hague, in accordance with article 33 of the charter of the United Nations and article 36 of the statute of the International Court of Justice. Not surprisingly, the Gulf Co-operation Council countries—including Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar—have repeatedly backed the UAE, which is an approach that I endorse. However, there has been wider support.

In April 2009, the EU and GCC reiterated their support in a joint communiqué for a peaceful settlement of the dispute in accordance with international law through direct negotiations between the parties or by referring the matter to International Court of Justice. In January 2009, the Speakers of the Italian and Turkish Parliaments spoke on the matter. The Speaker of the Italian Parliament said that Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs belong to the UAE and that diplomacy is the way to restore them. The Speaker of the Turkish Parliament said that he would speak to the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, urging the country to speed up the resolution of the dispute. Last year, the US deputy assistant Defence Secretary for middle eastern affairs, Christopher Straub, supported the UAE's claim over the islands, accusing Iran of exercising hegemonic behaviour in the region.

In recent years, the UAE has painstakingly set out its legal and historical case for sovereignty over the three islands. It points to a clear British recognition of that claim during the protection of the Trucial states. It notes the protestation to Britain by the then rulers of the two Emirates against Iranian violations of its sovereignty. The two Emirates exercised all aspects of sovereignty over the islands before the Iranian invasion, including levying and collecting taxes and duties from pearl fishers and shepherds using the island, installing governors on the island, running public services and so on.

The best way ahead is surely for the International Court of Justice to consider the matter in detail and to reach a conclusion. As I have said, I believe that the UAE has a strong case. Of course, there are many other areas of contention in the Gulf and the middle east, but the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs should not be forgotten by the House. We have a long and historic association with the UAE and a responsibility to comment on the matter. Indeed, given the strategic location of the islands, the security and stability of the Gulf region will remain fragile in the absence of an effective resolution.

1.48 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan)—my honourable and good friend—on securing this Adjournment debate. I thank him for his generous and kind remarks on my new role. I suspect that No. 10 has not been in contact with my hon. Friend this morning, because it has been trying the wrong number. I will happily share the correct number later—not, I hasten to add, that I have the ability to influence decisions taken there.

My hon. Friend has raised an incredibly important issue. The Foreign Office and the Government are concerned by the continuing dispute between the UAE and Iran over the over the islands of Abu Musa, Lesser Tunb and Greater Tunb. As previous Ministers have made clear, we support a peaceful settlement of the dispute by means in accordance with international law. That might be through direct bilateral discussions or undertaken through international mechanisms, such as the International Court of Justice. The United Kingdom, the Gulf Co-operation Council and the European Union are concerned about the lack of progress. As his Excellency, Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid, Prime Minister of the UAE, said last week:

> "If this issue is resolved...we could together avoid all that could possibly disturb the security and stability of this region and the relationship between the two countries."

Of course, any agreement must be in accordance with international law.

British interests demand peace, tranquillity and constructive relationships in the middle east and in the Gulf. That is the entire focus of British foreign policy in the region, where we have long-standing friendships and partnerships. Events in the Gulf have profound effects on our own security, economy and commercial interests. As hon. Members are aware, the Gulf has 60 per cent. of the world's oil reserves and 40 per cent. of its gas reserves. We work closely with Gulf nations to enhance regional security, to combat terrorism and to develop a sustainable and successful global economy. As the Foreign Secretary said only last month, in just two generations, the Gulf states have created some of the most advanced and inspiring cities in the world.

The UAE is one of the UK's closest allies, and we enjoy a long-standing, warm and valued relationship built on years of co-operation in fields as diverse as trade, defence and low carbon energy. For some years, we have been working in co-operation with the UAE in the development of its military capability, and we have assured our Emirati friends of our substantial and enduring support to their security as well as our commitment to that of the wider Gulf region. These close ties have been brought even closer by our peoples—the migration and travel of UK and UAE citizens—and by trade. The UAE is now the biggest middle east export market for UK companies. In fact, the UK exports more to the Gulf than it does to China and Hong Kong combined—a total of £12 billion of goods and services in 2007. About 130,000 UK nationals live in the UAE and more than 1 million visit every year. Many UK companies have a presence in the UAE, including representatives of our banking profession, construction industry and energy sector.

To echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary during his visit to the UAE last November, the UAE is a global success story and a

> "model of openness; business-friendly, tolerant, peaceful and responsible...a microcosm of what a successful Middle East can become".

If I may, Mr. Weir, I shall depart briefly from my script and refer to a comment made by my hon. Friend. The most important recent development is the fact that the UAE now owns Manchester City, which is the most important and successful football team in the world—at least that will be the future story. I wish that I could say, hand on heart, that that has been the story of the past 30 years, but I have chosen to support the club in an era when trophies have not been readily available. However, I am delighted not only that the UAE's royal family

[Mr. Ivan Lewis]

have assumed ownership of the club, but that so far they have been very clear about their responsibility to the wider community.

I pay tribute to them not just for purchasing the football club and being determined to make it successful, but for caring passionately about the city of Manchester and about Greater Manchester more generally. That relationship with Manchester City will bring opportunities in economic regeneration, social relationships and bridging divides between different regions of the world. I have been very impressed during these early days. I also have four season tickets, Mr. Weir, so I do not spend my time in the corporate hospitality part of the great stadium of Eastlands.

Mr. Mike Weir (in the Chair): Order. I remind the Minister to return to the subject of the debate.

Mr. Lewis: I shall move on, Mr. Weir. I just thought that it was important to make that serious point. Of course, I am delighted that the royal family now owns the football club that I support. I am also delighted, however, with their engagement with the wider city and with Greater Manchester. That is important educationally, culturally and economically, and I welcome the early stages of that relationship.

Sir Nicholas Winterton: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment and new responsibilities; they are, indeed, richly deserved. However, have not his comments emphasised the importance of a total commitment from us to the UAE that it will always have our support in this matter? Clearly it owns those islands, and it must be in no doubt that we will give it ongoing and total support.

Mr. Lewis: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a salient point. The British role is to argue, advocate and facilitate a solution that underpins stability in the region, and that is consistent with international law. It would be easy, especially on day two of my new job, to engage in bellicose rhetoric, but that would not be appropriate in this job, and I have never done it in any previous job. In this new role, grandstanding will not help the situation. I have made clear our friendship and economic and social relationship with the UAE, which are as deep-rooted as those with almost any other country. We are very proud of that relationship, and we want to deepen and strengthen it in future.

We believe in the need for a just settlement in the matter before us today. The best role that we can play is to continue to make that point to the UAE and to use all means possible through international institutions to influence Iran's attitude and to encourage it to desire a sensible and fair settlement of that long-standing dispute, which continues to be a bone of contention and adds to instability and insecurity. We hope for rapid progress, but we want to facilitate a solution. It is very important, however, that whatever solution emerges is consistent with international law.

As hon. Members are aware, regional security in that part of the world is vital. We therefore support efforts to resolve the issues peacefully and quickly. History has shown that acts of aggression do not create lasting peace and stability. As hon. Members have said, we remain concerned about the lack of progress in a dispute that has lasted for 40 years, and we shall continue to do everything in our power to facilitate a fair and just settlement by any standards in accordance with international law. My new role gives me an opportunity to engage afresh with this issue and to consider mechanisms—perhaps bilateral, but more realistically through international institutions—to begin a process to end this 40-year-old dispute. I shall focus on this matter, consider what is possible and keep hon. Members informed of any progress that we can make.

Question put and agreed to.

1.57 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 June 2009

[BOB RUSSELL *in the Chair*]

Energy Regulation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Mr. Watts.)*

9.30 am

Mr. John Baron (Billericay) (Con): I welcome you, Mr. Russell, to what I think is your first time in the Chair in Westminster Hall. I was not, by my reasonably late entrance, trying to make it a difficult start for you. I also welcome the Minister to her new duties. She has already set out her stall at the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and it will be interesting to see how she applies herself to the problems of energy. She has our best wishes.

The purpose of the debate is to put the spotlight on energy customers who are simply paying too much for their energy, including many of the 5 million or so households nationwide who live in fuel poverty. My interest in the subject will be familiar to hon. Members. I introduced a ten-minute Bill to require energy companies to offer cheapest-tariff information on their domestic invoices and statements. However, the debate has a wider remit—it is about energy regulation in a wider sense. It is right that we track the progress of our energy markets towards proper liberalisation. Now is an excellent time for such a debate. As we know, Ofgem's consultation on its recent retail market remedies closed at the end of May, and commentators are waiting to see how the regulator addresses the various problems uncovered by its market probe last year.

One of the biggest problems facing consumers is that tariff structures are notoriously complex and energy bills can be mind-boggling. Those factors are stopping many consumers—not all—engaging in the market and getting better deals. Which? has suggested that there are 15 to 20 different basic tariffs for each supplier. That figure rises to more than 4,000 tariffs across suppliers when factors such as variance payment methods and special offers are taken into account. It is unsurprising that something like 70 per cent. of consumers find the number of tariffs confusing. I suggest that overwhelming choice is no real choice at all. The effect of the confusion on the market speaks for itself. Evidence suggests that a quarter of those who switch, and something like half of those who switch as a result of doorstep selling, actually end up paying more for their energy. That is a clear example of how confusing tariffs and energy bills can be.

The best way of promoting competition and improving the effectiveness of energy markets is to give consumers better information about their energy use, what they are being charged and what else is available. Therefore, we should be requiring energy companies to publish clear information about cheapest tariffs on domestic bills and statements. I am not suggesting for one moment that energy companies should calculate the lowest possible rate for each customer—for one thing, suppliers will not always have access to all the relevant information, and no one is proposing to impose such a bureaucratic burden on industry—but we could, at very little cost, improve transparency.

We should therefore require energy companies to include on statements what the cheapest tariff would be taking into account certain basic assumptions. A customer, for example, may have online access and so make a payment by direct debit. The information could take into account the pattern of a customer's energy use, but it could also reveal how much would be saved if they were to switch and how to go about that. There would be several advantages. It could encourage greater use of internet and direct debit payments, which would be for the benefit of all. It could also help to track changes in tariffs and remind customers of the discounts from which they benefit and when they end.

I suggest those things as a bare minimum. The same criteria could apply to those on social tariffs. The energy company could be obliged to state whether a customer is on the cheapest available tariff. Obviously, the underlying assumptions would change—those on social tariffs may not have access to bank accounts, for example. Even so, the onus, with the appropriate set of assumptions, could be on energy companies to make it easier for those on social tariffs to see whether they are on the cheapest social tariff. We must remember that until fairly recently—until Ofgem's intervention—some people on social tariffs were paying more than those who had direct access to banks, direct debits and the internet. That cannot be right and, fortunately, Ofgem put it right.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): I am pleased to make the first intervention under your chairmanship, Mr. Russell.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his long campaign on this issue, which is on the record in the House. He will be aware that some social tariffs charged more than ordinary tariffs and that I have tabled an early-day motion on the matter. Does he share my disappointment that even though more than 800,000 people are on social tariffs, Ofgem and the Government have not really tackled the problem of getting consistent, simple, easy-to-understand, more accessible and fairer social tariffs for the group of people at the bottom? We need to do more to help the poorest people.

Mr. Baron: I believe that my proposals would go a long way to addressing that issue. Many people on social tariffs could be on an even cheaper tariff. As we know, there are many social tariffs, and they are very different in make-up. As with tariffs that can be paid by direct debit and online, we could simplify social tariffs. One advantage of obliging energy companies to go down that line is that it would result in a great simplification of the tariffs. Making people aware of what tariff they are being charged when they receive their bill would focus the minds of energy companies on the task in hand, which must be to simplify the tariffs. For many customers, the cheapest tariff is the social tariff, which Ofgem now says ought to be no more expensive than any other available. Others are likely to use a direct debit internet account.

Statements could also be used to convey information about a household's energy use compared with, say, other households of a similar size, in the same street or building, or historically. Through such additional

[Mr. Baron]

information mechanisms, we may be able to nudge customers into making behavioural changes that could help to conserve energy, save the environment and reduce bills. In particular, we need to give customers a clear idea how much energy each kilowatt-hour represents in terms of appliance use. For example, customers are more likely to change their habits if they know how much leaving their TV on standby costs.

It may appear unusual for a Conservative to prescribe in such detail how firms should represent information to customers, but we must remember that energy is not a luxury item or good, and the market is far from truly competitive. Consumers therefore need special help, if they are to be truly empowered, hence my proposal would strike a blow for social responsibility and common sense.

Bob Spink: The hon. Gentleman is being most generous in giving way, but I wish to disabuse him of one small point. It is not at all unusual for a Conservative to want better and clearer information for consumers. Conservatives believe in choice and real choice comes only from proper information.

Mr. Baron: The hon. Gentleman is probably being kind to me, but that is a fair point. How can one make informed choices if there is no clear information on which to base them?

I am grateful to Which? for its support for my proposals, although it has been busy proposing that a summary box in a similar format is put on all bills across all suppliers. Information would include the precise name of the tariff, the amount of energy used and how the overall cost had been calculated, which suggests that customers should also be reminded of any discounts from which they are currently benefiting, when those end and any fees they will be charged for changing tariff or supplier. That is vital information.

In fairness, Ofgem has also made some suggestions on the matter, as we know. The regulator is consulting on the desirability of an annual statement to customers detailing energy consumed and a reminder of the customer's right to switch. Information might also be included stating how much customers are paying compared with other packages available from that supplier. However, Which? and I agree that it would be a mistake for that information to be conveyed only once a year at an arbitrary time instead of alongside each energy bill. After all, it is when consumers receive their energy bill—perhaps quarterly—that they are most keenly aware of the costs and most likely to try to do something about them.

I believe that we can be ambitious and require companies not just to give a general picture of where customers stand in relation to other users but to identify the cheapest rate for them. That is the difference between my proposals and Ofgem's. Ofgem talked about stating an average cost when it came to tariffs; I am suggesting that energy companies could go one step further and detail the cheapest tariff for that particular customer, taking basic assumptions given the area pattern of energy use. It is not beyond the wit of man for energy companies, with all the technology available to them, to do that on their customers' behalf. Ofgem proposes a further tranche of useful information, but I contend that it has excluded the single most useful piece of information—which rate is cheapest.

I have put my proposal to the Government on a number of occasions and have been moderately encouraged by the response. In January, during oral questions, the Secretary of State described the idea as ingenious, which was kind of him, and promised to consider it. Only last week, the Minister's predecessor agreed at oral questions that mine was a very good question, and again promised to look into it. However, I have heard little of substance from DECC, having raised the issue for a reasonable time now, and I would like to take this opportunity to put the Minister on the spot and ask her what is being done about the proposal. Are the Government considering the question, or—I do not wish to be unkind—is Ofgem being used as a shield for inactivity? I would appreciate it if she were to address that point in her reply.

Will the Minister join me in evaluating some of the changes proposed by Ofgem in response to the findings of its market probe? Whether the policies can be implemented will determine whether the Government should take a more interventionist approach. Ofgem is finalising its policies. It is useful for Members of the House to have the opportunity to comment on them, and hopefully to influence the debate. In that spirit, perhaps the Minister will undertake to send a copy of today's *Official Report* to the regulator for its consideration.

I shall briefly address some of the specific issues that Ofgem is considering. Ofgem has been consulting on a ban on unjustified price differences. That is important because at present companies can set different prices in different areas in order, for example, to attract new customers. Those prices do not necessarily reflect relative costs. Customers in one region or on one tariff could be subsidising customers in another region. That can lead to a situation in which the people who can least afford it are paying even more because of their method of payment.

A new licence condition will require prices to reflect the cost to companies relative to the payment method used. It is also intended that undue discrimination between customers inside and outside areas where the supplier was once the local incumbent will be ironed out. That bold initiative is welcome, but one naturally questions why a sunset clause is being suggested after three years. Ofgem's logic appears to be that its package of retail remedies will come into play by that date, but it is difficult to feel confident that enough progress will necessarily have been made. I am minded to agree with Consumer Focus: it might be better to undertake a review of the market in three years' time and remove the ban only when it has been demonstrated that the desired changes have taken place. At any rate, we need to hear from Ofgem how it will monitor compliance with the new licence condition, which is likely to be a tough job.

Ofgem has also set out new overarching standards of conduct that suppliers should meet. Most of the standards are common sense, and I hope that they are being observed already. They include not selling customers products they do not understand and not preventing them from switching without good reason. However, having said that, I refer to the earlier statistic suggesting that half of those who switch through doorstep selling switch to a more expensive tariff. We know that there are improvements to be made. However, serious questions must be asked about the status of the standards. What

enforcement mechanism will be provided, and what incentives are there for energy companies to comply with them? Without clear means of enforcement, the standards could prove toothless.

Meanwhile, the threat of exit is what forces firms to stay competitive. Customers in debt have traditionally faced the greatest difficulty when it comes to switching, lending credence to the idea that the blessings of liberalisation have not flowed to those who deserve them most—the least well-off. Ofgem should therefore be congratulated on taking steps to make it easier for customers in debt to switch, giving them the right to switch where debt is the result of supplier error and doubling the threshold below which customers can transfer debt from one supplier to another.

I am doubtful about Ofgem's proposals on price comparison. The suggestion that a new price scorecard to simplify information on tariffs will make comparison easier between different suppliers is difficult to prove. The usefulness of a price comparison tool will depend ultimately on consumers' ability to estimate their own levels and patterns of energy use for the purpose of comparison. It sounds complex, and users would need to be guided through the process, but perhaps Ofgem will be able to persuade us otherwise. We shall have to wait and see.

It is right that we, as parliamentarians, should allow Ofgem the space to present its proposals and seek compliance from the industry, but we must also ask whether further, stronger measures might be needed in future. How does the Minister intend to monitor and evaluate the implementation of Ofgem's measures and their impact on consumers? What failure criteria will she apply? At what point is she prepared to consider whether Ofgem needs stronger powers to shape the market and benefit consumers? In other words, does Ofgem have strong enough teeth? At what point might it be necessary to refer the matter to the Competition Commission or the Office of Fair Trading?

I accept that the issues might be seen by some as dull and technical, but I contend that they are extremely important, particularly for the 5 million people who live in fuel poverty. For evidence, one need look no further than the winter of 2007-08, when 22,000 people over the age of 65 died of cold-related illnesses, far more than the number in countries on the continent with more severe weather conditions. The issue is vital. I look forward to the Minister's response.

9.49 am

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): Mr. Russell, I apologise to you and to colleagues for being slightly late. I am glad that I was able to hear a substantive part of the speech made by the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron), and I am happy to follow him in this debate. He has again raised a subject in which he has long taken an interest, and I respect him and thank him for doing so. I am one of the signatories to the early-day motion tabled in his name on the subject, and I have read his contributions in previous debates, sometimes together with my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who has also been involved.

The debate is also timely because of the work that Ofgem is doing. Like colleagues, I have met Ofgem and discussed its general work and that particular piece of work. I agree with the hon. Member for Billericay that it would be helpful if Ofgem shared its preliminary view on a consultative basis before reaching its final view on the way forward.

If I have read the new Government list correctly, I am right to congratulate the Minister on her promotion to Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change. She knows that we have great respect for her work in this area. She is a parliamentary neighbour of mine and we have always enjoyed good, amicable, cross-border relations. We both shared the disappointment when Millwall nearly won the play-off finals against Scunthorpe. We are having to defer our excitement about Millwall's promotion by another year, but I hope we will both be there supporting them next year.

Bob Spink: Before the hon. Gentleman moves away from Ofgem, does he agree that perhaps its greatest failure has been in not tackling the failure of profiteering companies to pass on wholesale prices? That is not just about spot prices but about the actual prices paid by companies for the energy that they sell on, because they often forward-buy.

Simon Hughes: That is certainly an issue, and I have raised it with all the companies and with Ofgem. On the day that I took over this job, at the beginning of the year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) and I had a fuel-price summit with all the major suppliers, as well as Ofgem and others, and that was one of the issues we raised, because it has been very much on the agenda.

I am conscious that there is a further, hidden issue in that the way in which someone pays for their supply might leave them disadvantaged when it comes to benefiting from price changes. Whether a customer pays on a daily rate is a big issue, because companies do not necessarily reduce their prices as soon as their costs are reduced. If a customer is built into a system, they might get the benefit much later—or, arguably, not at all if they pay by direct debit.

I should like to pay one more compliment to the consumer association Which? on its report, in relation to which it came to see me. I have always had great respect for Which? and have subscribed to it in the past. It has confirmed what some of us who know about this issue were already very aware of—that there are 4,000 different tariffs available in the UK, and that the confusion they bring is not in anybody's interests. These things are difficult enough for people like us in the Chamber, by which I mean not only the politicians but the civil servants, the staff of the House and the people who watch and take an interest. I would be interested to know how many times my parliamentary colleagues have changed their supplier in recent years, if any of them is willing to admit it. I own up to not having changed mine, to my knowledge, because it is so low on my list of priorities, when I get home at 12 o'clock at night, to work out which tariff might be better. We know for a fact that 50 per cent. of people do not change their supplier, and, if I may say so, some people are less able to address these issues than other people due to intelligence, time, ability, other responsibilities, language and other reasons.

It is difficult for people to make considered decisions on a regular basis against an ever-changing kaleidoscope of facts. I have had occasion to query a couple of bills,

[Simon Hughes]

such as when my brother and I took over the management of the house in which my mother lived on her death 18 months ago. We discovered all sorts of irregularities when we tried to get regular bills, and tried to go from having estimated bills to bills requiring a reading. For example, one cannot necessarily get the whole benefit immediately of a change in reading, and therefore reduce the cost, when one goes from an estimated bill to an accurate bill because it is spread over a different period and one has to wait until the next quarter. Those are little things, but for people on tight incomes they are important and make a significant difference, so I thank Which? for doing its job.

I see suppliers regularly, as we all do, and I decided to check specifically the three suppliers to whom I have recently had access. The best illustration of the problem is provided by Scottish Power, which paradoxically supplies fuel to some members of my family in Wales. It has sent out a booklet, dated September 2008, entitled, "Prices: Your domestic gas and electricity pricing information". The booklet does not have page numbers but it has many pages of information describing a "Single Rate", a "Two Rate", a "Domestic 'S'" rate, an "Economy 7" rate and a "White Meter No. 1¥" rate—one has to check what that sign means. As well as those five electricity rates, there is a daily service charge, a price for "All/Day kWh", a separate night rate, and prices without and with VAT.

The booklet then gives all the different package payment options. One can have a "Premier Plus Package", paying monthly by direct debit or standing order, a "Standard Package", paying quarterly by direct debit, cash, cheque or postal order, a "Weekly Payment Package", paying weekly by payment book or card, or a "Prepayment Package", paying as one uses a prepayment meter. If that is not enough, one can have a "Premier Plus Package", paying monthly by direct debit or standing order for gas, or a "Standard Package" for gas with different payment options. There are then standing charge options for gas and some packages that have no standing charges. In the second half of the booklet, there are more categories for standing charge options, including a "ComfortPlus Control" rate, a "ComfortPlus White Meter" rate, a "Domestic & Economy 2000" rate, a "Domestic & Off Peak C" rate, "Domestic & Off Peak 2‡" rate, a "Domestic & Off Peak A‡" rate and a "Domestic & Off Peak D‡" rate. I am only halfway through the booklet, but I think you get the idea, Mr. Russell.

I want to make a simple set of propositions to the Minister, because I think we are in danger—I say this with respect to the hon. Member for Billericay—of buying into a system that has begun to be so complex that we think it will be sufficient to simplify a bit of it. I should like to put to the Minister not a formulated party policy position, but some suggestions for her and the Government to consider in relation to Ofgem's work. I have deduced that Ministers as a whole, as well as my party and others, think that the way in which the market was privatised was not, in the end, in consumers' best interests. I have spoken to my right hon. Friends the Members for Gordon (Malcolm Bruce) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), who were responsible for our policy when these matters were going through the House some years ago, and they predicted that it was not the right way to proceed with the industry, and I am confirmed in that view.

I am conscious that we have to have a competitive industry within the European Union, although I observe that whereas the French and others have penetrated the British market well, we have not done quite so well in penetrating the mainland European market, so there does not seem to be absolute equity of access. It is not the first time that that has been mentioned—*[Interruption]*—and I shall not get the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink) going on that. I am pro-European, but it appears that something is not quite right in that context. My background proposition is that we have not got the market quite right, and my proposal is that the Government should confirm that we will all have available to us, in the long term, a smart meter or super-smart meter, as they would move everybody to the cheapest tariff automatically without them having to worry about things. That is more or less the idea of the technology, but that will not happen tomorrow, as the meters must be put into everybody's homes. The Italians installed them the most quickly—I am told that they did the whole of Italy within three years. I have taken advice from people who have thought about the technical aspect, including colleagues such as my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Andrew Stunell), who worked in the architectural profession, local government and elsewhere before he came to the House. He made it clear that it would be far better to have a longer period for installation—not least so there is the capacity to do the work. In a sense, it is nonsense to train the people to do the job if there is only going to be a three-year programme around the country, so it might be better to have a six-year programme or something like that.

Let us assume that there will eventually be a super-smart meter option for everyone. Until then, we need something that helps people to make choices. The Government should think of a new way of giving people the discounted tariff, which exists for people on low incomes. I was at a dinner the other day with National Energy Action, Neighbourhood Energy and British Gas. British Gas told me that it has 300,000 people on the subsidised tariff rate. Until recently, the way for someone to receive the subsidised tariff was for them to tell British Gas that they are a pensioner, or on income support or the disability living allowance. I gather that, until recently, they did not have to prove that they were on any of those things; they just asserted that they were. That has changed and proof is now required.

We could have a simple system that ties in with the Department for Work and Pensions, so that pensioners and people on disability living allowance, income support or in receipt of child benefit can be given a subsidised rate. The reality is that the following groups of people are much more likely to use fuel than the rest of us: people with children—the more children someone has, the more the need is; people who are older, for example, past retirement age; people who are ill or disabled and are at home all day because they cannot work; and people who are out of work. A household full of healthy adults, whether it comprises a single person, a couple, students or other groups of people, should not expect subsidised rates for their fuel.

I am not presenting a final formulated proposal, because we need to work the matter out through dialogue with Ministers and Ofgem, but we could have a very simple system that would make it as easy as possible to have, in principle, two types of rate: a normal rate and a cheaper rate for more vulnerable customers. Hon. Members are here because they want to tackle fuel poverty. Obviously, there is not a direct match between the types of people in fuel poverty and those categories because someone who lives in a hard-to-heat home has much greater difficulty than someone who lives in a less hard-to-heat home. If we pull into the categories people who have children under 18 at home—the state knows who they are—people of retirement age, and people who are on disability living allowance or on income support, we are likely to catch the individuals who do not have an income, about whom we are most concerned. That is my first proposition.

My second proposition is that, at the end of this exercise, it is important to ensure that the energy companies are required to publish publicly—twice a year before and after winter would be reasonable—a grid of the six suppliers with the six key comparators of information that people need in the local and national press. I hope that Ministers will be tough about that with Ofgem because they have hinted that if necessary they will take the powers to be tough and legislate or regulate. Publishing such information would mean that people could make a choice. Everyone would know that, for example, the weekend that the clocks go forward and the weekend that they go back, they would find in their local paper, library and elsewhere a table comparing the suppliers' offers. I do not understand why that cannot happen and why the key facts and figures—for example, the per unit cost—cannot be made available.

Thirdly, in terms of the demand system, there is obviously an argument for having a cheaper purchase rate for those who purchase electricity at night when the demand is less. The other day, when I read the suppliers' information—not just Scottish Power but British Gas and Electricité de France—I noticed that there is not even a consistent time period for the cheaper night-time rate. The time at which people clock on to the cheaper rate depends on the company, which is nonsense. I gather that the peak time for use of electricity and gas is understandably between 4 and 8 pm, so the cheaper rate could be available from 8pm to 8am, or from 8pm to 7am if demand starts earlier in the morning. It is obvious that there is a downtime at night when people use less energy, and it should be possible to have a system that allows people to take their feed then and be charged at a lower unit rate. That principle could apply generally across the UK so that everyone knows about it. If people have the systems that allow them to have storage heaters and so on, they will benefit from such a proposal.

My final proposition—I have thought about this quite a lot—is that there should be no differential price dependent upon the method of payment, with one exception. Whether someone pays by prepayment meter, direct debit, quarterly, weekly or monthly, they should be charged the same rate provided that they understand that if they do not pay within seven days of the date that they have agreed under whatever system they are using, there might be a slight penalty. Let us consider the proposal the other way round: there would be a discount for prompt payment—whoever someone is and whether or not they are on direct debit, prepayment or so on. The Liberal Democrats have argued that the suppliers wrongly penalise two groups of people, and that they should not do so. They penalise people who have to pay up front by pre-payment meters—that should not happen because they are often the poorest people—and they penalise people who do not pay by direct debit. That is one category. Suppliers also penalise the low user because the first unit purchased is charged at a higher cost than later units. If someone purchases only a small number of units, they pay relatively much more.

If we are going to deal with that inequality and ensure that no one is penalised for being a low user or because they use a payment method that they need for their own money management, we should have a requirement that says, no matter how someone pays, they will be charged the same price. Such a requirement would get rid of pages of this bumf and it would mean everyone would understand the system. The rate would be x per unit this year—the price would vary twice a year—and suppliers could apply to Ofgem or the Government for permission to vary their rates more than twice a year if the price of fuel went up or down significantly. Other issues would also have to be looked at—for example, the need to provide warnings about price increases a certain number of days before they happen—but my plea is for us to have a very simple system that is led by the needs of the consumer, not the needs of the supplier.

Mr. Baron: I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman with great interest. I totally agree that simplicity must be the overriding aim when we consider how to help the consumer. However, will he explain the differences between our proposals because, when smart meters are introduced, I question whether the technology will be advanced enough automatically to ensure that every single household is on the cheapest tariff. That is a debate for the future. In the interim, my proposal suggests that it is not beyond the wit of man for energy companies simply to state on energy bills whether the customer is on the cheapest tariff available given the pattern of energy use. The hon. Gentleman's suggestion sounds a bit more complex than that. Will he perhaps guide us on his proposals?

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman knows—and I hope that I have said so clearly—that I respect his work. Outside this Chamber, I am happy to have a continuing discussion with him about the matter. I think that our proposals are complementary. I absolutely do not dissent from his proposal that such information should be available on the front of someone's bill because patterns of use are normally consistent and, therefore, it is entirely possible to draw such conclusions. Indeed, more and more bills give some description of usage over a longer time span.

I am seeking to deal with the second issue that arises from that, and which involves a quarterly bill that says, "You are not getting the cheapest supply available, given your pattern of use". Of course, EDF Energy, Scottish Power and British Gas will not automatically tell customers where to go to get a cheaper option. Until we have smart meter automaticity, the customer

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will have to make that choice. I am trying to deal with the fact that because there are so many options available—the price is determined by payment method as well as other things—that is not sufficient of itself. However, I would absolutely support that additional information on the bill.

I shall make two final points, as I am conscious that the hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) will contribute, and that the Minister will then reply. Does the Minister agree that we should demand that energy companies show not just the amount of energy used in the payment period, as they already do, but the embedded carbon used? We could begin to educate people about the implications of their energy use in terms of the big climate change threat that faces us. The last principle is that we should seek to reward customers for energy efficiency and reducing energy usage. There should be an incentive to do so.

As a postscript, there are other things besides varying tariffs and payment options. Customers can get Nectar points and all kinds of other goodies. I believe that they can even get air miles with some companies, but I may be wrong about that—I do not mean to mislead people. The most important thing is that we should try to get a culture in which, of course, we deal with fuel poverty. That is a bad phrase: we are talking about a lack of warm homes, or homes that are inadequately heated, thereby leading to illness and sometimes death. Of course, we want to ensure that people are able to look after themselves and their families well, but we want to reduce energy use and harm to the climate from excess emissions. We should be helping everybody to achieve those things. There is a separate debate about how homes in Britain are insulated which we are all alive to, but it is for another place and time. That is an equal imperative.

It would be helpful if, when she replies, the Minister responded positively to the constructive suggestions from this side. I hope that she will support us by saying to Ofgem, when it has thought about what it might propose next but before it finalises its proposals, knowing that the Government are watching it closely and wanting it to be pretty tough with the industry, that we would value a short opportunity to respond to the consultation, so that we can get the most robust position possible under the present law. Perhaps before too long, we might change the law, whoever is in government, to have a much more consumer-focused system.

10.13 am

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): I warmly welcome you to the Chair, Mr. Russell. I hope that your first experience of this exercise has not been too traumatic. I warmly congratulate the Minister on her promotion. As I mentioned in a debate yesterday, many of us have found working with her to be extremely productive and a congenial process. No one doubts her commitment to ending fuel poverty. She has worked in that area for many years, and we would be keen to work with her to try to find cross-party solutions that address some of the issues. I congratulate her on her appointment.

I gather that the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) has been appointed the Under-Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change. We wish him well in that role. I understand that he will be unpaid and am slightly concerned about having someone holding such an important position as a part-time volunteer. Nevertheless, we congratulate him on his promotion to Minister.

I welcome the measures that my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) proposed this morning. He has campaigned long and hard on these issues and has attracted significant support. The Secretary of State paid him the compliment of describing his idea as "ingenious". I believe that is a way of saying that his idea is well worth exploring further—undoubtedly it is. The way in which he got non-governmental organisations to support him is also incredibly important. It shows that there is a strong sense in the world outside Westminster that the system does not work as well as it ought to. I congratulate him not just on his ten-minute Bill and his early-day motion, but on securing this important debate.

I welcomed the comments of the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink). His presence today shows his personal commitment, as did his interventions in the debate. I am concerned, however, that the issues we are discussing have not yet been properly addressed.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) spoke about switching. I did, in fact, switch a few years ago, because I wanted to move to a green tariff. It became evident that it was not a cheaper tariff. The experience was straightforward. Several shadow Ministers went through the exercise. Disturbingly, one of my colleagues tried to switch his gas supply to an electricity supplier that did not provide gas, which, I imagine, had dramatic consequences for the safety of his household. Generally, several of us switched. The process was straightforward, but it did not put us on to a more favourable tariff. The hon. Gentleman was helpful when he read out from the booklet. Initially, it was as exciting as someone reading from a telephone directory, but it showed how completely baffling the tariffs are. No one could be expected to read through that booklet and understand at the end of the process which system would be better for them.

One of the things that became clear was that the more favourable tariffs are available only to those who have bank accounts. That is a matter of great concern. It is one of the reasons why we have suggested extending the remit of the Post Office card account to enable people who do not have a bank account but do have a Post Office card account to pay their utility bills, particularly their energy bills, using that account. It has been independently estimated that, if that were to happen, 4 million people without bank accounts could save about £100 a year on their utility bills.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that the only tariff distinction should be between those who pay on time and those who do not. He may have seen me grimace at that point. My concern is that those who do not pay on time are not necessarily those who can afford to but are lazy, but probably those who cannot afford to pay on time. They juggle different bills. They may have to pay their rent that week or do something else, and they simply have to put something off. It worries me greatly that the only people who might be subject to a higher tariff would be those who are probably finding it most difficult to pay. In any reforms, we must ensure that there are not perverse consequences which would actually move us in the wrong direction.

Simon Hughes: I completely understand the issue. In a constituency such as mine, I am hugely sensitive to it. I was seeking to find a way to ensure that people did not abuse the system and fail to pay but not ever suffer the consequences, but also sort out the present situation in respect of people who pay in advance. The certainty of payment is an advantage to the company that receives the money. I am happy to continue the debate about how we deal with prompt payment as opposed to late payment but mitigate the consequences for those who are in difficulty.

Charles Hendry: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. It highlights the importance of smart meters and our frustration that the smart meter programme is not moving forward faster. In Northern Ireland, 40 per cent. of households are now equipped with smart meters. It has a lower rate for prepayment customers than for mainstream consumers—because customers pay in advance, the company can be clear that bills will be paid. Smart meters can help to tackle some of the issues; I shall come back to that shortly, if I may.

It is clear to us that the debate on fuel poverty is moving in the wrong direction. We have had a revised interpretation of the law. When it was introduced, it stated that fuel poverty should be abolished by 2010 for vulnerable households, and by 2016 for all households. It was not clear at the time that the few words

"as far as practically possible"

would be attached to it. As we now move towards the 2010 deadline, it is evident that the numbers are getting worse rather than better, and that it is virtually impossible to meet the target. It has been disappointing to find that there has been a lot of wiggle room, which has enabled Ministers to get off what we thought was a legal hook.

Targets should not be introduced without a road map to explain how they will be reached. It sounded all well and good to introduce a target for eradicating fuel poverty, but nobody said where we needed to be by 2006, or by 2008, if we were to meet the target by 2010. So as we move closer towards that target, people could say whether or not we are moving in the right direction and ask what more needs to be done. This is a general problem that one has with targets in this area.

In tackling fuel poverty, we need to be clear about the different roles that could be played by Government and the energy companies. Many issues to do with fuel poverty need to be dealt with centrally by Government. Often, people who are fuel-poor are probably generally in poverty and do not just struggle to pay their electricity and gas bills: they struggle to pay all their bills, including food and phone bills. The solution to that is probably through Government giving more targeted support to the people who need it most.

The hon. Gentleman talked about having a separate system for people in vulnerable groups and mentioned families with children and people who are elderly or have disabilities. It is hard for an energy company to know who is in any of those categories at any time. For example, they do not know the situation of a marital break-up—whether there is one income or two or whether a child has moved away from home—or what has happened in terms of people's financial circumstances. The one organisation that knows that is the Government, because they are charged with paying benefits to those vulnerable groups. Therefore, there is a distinct role for the Government in this regard. Sometimes we try to confuse the work of the energy companies and impose on them responsibilities that the Government are more equipped to tackle. There is a natural role for Government in this process, just as there is also a natural role for the energy companies.

Simon Hughes: Of course, the Government have the information, not the energy companies. A way of dealing with the issue would be to make the winter fuel payment payable before Christmas—when everybody uses it, and some people use it for things other than electricity bills—to all the people in all those vulnerable categories, possibly for six months or across the year as a top-up to the other payments that they receive, such as pension benefit and the rest. That could be entirely the responsibility of the Government and it would be there to subsidise and reduce the consumers' bills.

Charles Hendry: Although there is a lot of ground worth exploring there, we would still have to decide whether a high-income family with one child should receive exactly the same benefit as a low-income family with four children. This issue is complex, but we probably agree fundamentally that Government can do some things better than companies. I find the prospect of the energy companies having to take legal action against their consumers to reclaim money that people have had because they did not advise the companies about a change in their circumstances too horrific to contemplate.

The companies should be doing much more to simplify tariffs. It is absurd that there are 4,000 tariffs out there. Although those have probably grown up for the best reasons in the world, it should be an important priority for the companies to go through them with a red pen, remove those that can be removed and move people on to a much smaller range of more readily understandable tariffs.

The companies should be giving much more information to their consumers on their bills, as my hon. Friend suggested directly, including when people call in and ask for advice. In the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change, I asked the heads of the electricity companies whether they would make it an absolute policy that anybody phoning to ask about a specific tariff would be told which one was most favourable, if the one they were inquiring about was not. The head of Scottish and Southern Energy said that, yes, that would be its policy. I hope that other companies will follow suit, so that if anybody rings up and asks, "Is this a good move?", they will be told, "Yes, but this one would be even better for you." That sort of information is important. Of course, the companies should also be helping with energy efficiency. They should ensure that their social tariffs should always be their lowest ones. A social tariff should not be bettered by some alternative tariff. People should be clear that if they are entitled to a social tariff it is the best available.

I think that all hon. Members can agree that bills do not give enough information on comparisons between different types of residences, as my hon. Friend suggested, or about what should be the cheapest tariff. We could go further. During the passage of the Energy Bill, we said that energy bills should tell the householder what CO_2 emissions relate to their usage, as the hon. Gentleman

[Charles Hendry]

suggested. If we want consumers to change, they must have information. As the hon. Member for Castle Point said, people only get real choice if they have real information. We should assume that, if they are given the information, consumers will have the ability and the common sense to make those choices.

We have suggested that consumers should be told what the environmental charges are. At the moment, typically, £70 or £80 of a £1,000 bill relates to the environmental charges: the contributions towards the renewables obligation certificates, the European emission trading scheme and the carbon emissions reduction target scheme. If we want an honest debate with the public about the cost of energy efficiency and environmental improvements, they should be told what that is costing them and it should be spelled out on their bill, because there would be a better engagement if people realised exactly what it is costing them.

Some people say, "This is all too confusing. The public simply wouldn't understand this range of information." That is wrong. One company out there called First Utility says that the first thing that it does with a new customer is to install a smart meter. Then it gives them a bill showing them their electricity use for every half hour during that month. The bill compares the half hour of greatest usage in a month with that in previous usage, so people can see when their lowest period of energy usage is, allowing them to ask themselves, "Why was my usage on that Friday so much greater than the previous Friday?", or whatever. First Utility has found that informed consumers really do start to make changes.

The introduction of smart meters is fundamental to the process of informing consumers. Smart meters will have great benefits in terms of energy efficiency and the environment and they will facilitate microgeneration. With regard to this debate, they will also make a massive contribution towards tackling fuel poverty. Smart meters will enable people to see what their usage is much more readily, on a real-time display in their homes, and see why something has suddenly surged. With a smart meter, people will know the comparative use of their tumble dryer, fridge and dishwasher and they will be able to determine how often they want to use things. They will be able to switch consumption, so that if they decide to use a better tariff in the night, they will get the benefits. Smart meters will not, per se, reduce people's energy tariffs, but if people start using them constructively and sensibly they will make significant reductions indeed. That is the sort of change that we all want to see.

We need to ensure that people have a better understanding generally of the equipment that they are buying. My hon. Friend touched on the fact that every white good that we buy has a star rating for energy efficiency: so should every television and computer and every bit of kit that we buy that uses electricity. We should have an understanding of that. Somebody looking at an LCD TV and a plasma screen TV should be able to choose based on the fact that the plasma screen TV will use massively more energy than the LCD one. That information needs to be made available to them.

We need to understand how technology is evolving. My hon. Friend mentioned standby buttons. Formerly, just maintaining the electricity supply for the nation's standby buttons used the same amount of power as the city of Liverpool: two power stations needed full-time. Technology is changing that. People can leave a new low-energy standby button on for three months using the same amount of electricity as it takes to boil a kettle once. The technology is moving beyond recognition in these areas. But is the standby button in my house the old one, which keeps Liverpool alight, or the new one that uses a fraction of the electricity used by a kettle? We need greater information if we are to have proper consumer choice in such matters. There needs to be much greater simplicity in the tariffs that are offered. The range of tariffs must be reduced and we must also ensure that consumers are in a position actively to compare what they are using.

My hon. Friend also touched on the important role of the regulator in this area. We have suggested that there may be grounds for a swift assessment of the prices by the Competition Commission to ensure that a reduction in wholesale price is passed on as quickly as the price increases appear to be passed on. Having looked at this, Ofgem has suggested that there is no collusion and that there is not a case to be answered. But there still remains in the public great anxiety about the speed with which price reductions are passed on.

We recognise that there are enormous demands on the energy companies at the moment. They are profitable businesses, but they are being asked to spend tens of billions of pounds on new generating capacity and developing renewable technologies, on energy efficiency in our homes and businesses and on grid upgrading.

We are conscious that in today's world some companies are based in France and Germany, and we must make a pitch to their boards for why they should continue to invest in the United Kingdom. We understand the competitive pressure facing the United Kingdom, and that if we do not receive new investment that will lead to tremendous energy insecurity, which will push up prices to very high levels in the middle of the next decade. We must balance that with the certainty that wholesale price reductions are passed on, and Ofgem can do more in that area.

There is no doubt that this is the time to act. At this time last year, we could see that winter prices would be horrible. Today's gas price is 26p a therm and the forward price for the winter is double that at 52p a therm. That is well below where it peaked last year, but clear indicators already exist that prices could rise again in the winter. When we see a rising trend in oil prices, we know that gas prices will follow. When the Government saw the warning signs last year, they did not act quickly enough. A great deal can be done now to use people who are losing their jobs to insulate our homes better and to ensure that those in fuel poverty are given every help to reduce their energy consumption. We would like to hear from the Minister that she will start to take real action on my hon. Friend's sensible proposals, which will start to give consumers the information that they need to make informed choices and to cut their bills.

10.31 am

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Joan Ruddock): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this interesting and productive debate. I particularly commend the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Baron) for obtaining it and

for presenting his case so ably. I also thank him for his kind words to me. I may not cover all my predecessor's brief, because we have not yet decided on portfolios and I have some major responsibilities for climate change. We will decide soon what the mix will be, but I am happy to be here.

We are all clear that people must be treated fairly by the companies that supply their energy and that they must have confidence in the rules and arrangements under which those companies operate. I agree with the interventions by the hon. Member for Castle Point (Bob Spink), because unless people have good information that they can understand, they cannot exercise choice, which is central to running a competitive energy market such as that in this country. We must do better.

Last year, the gas and electricity regulator, Ofgem, registered concerns from consumers and the Government, and responded by investigating the energy supply markets. Hon. Members have referred to that work, which revealed that many consumers suffer significant and unjustified disadvantages in what they pay for their energy. Under pressure from the Government and the regulator, suppliers have taken action to remove those unfair practices. That is a start, but all suppliers must take full responsibility for ending such practices and avoiding their repetition in future. Ofgem is working to ensure that through changes to suppliers' licences. We have made it absolutely clear to energy companies and Ofgem that fairness to consumers is a key priority, and I reiterate that today.

Ofgem's investigation also showed that consumers cannot always make the best choices about tariffs, payment methods and energy use, because they are not given information that they can understand fully and use effectively. I share the concerns of all hon. Members who have spoken this morning about information for consumers and the need to make great improvements.

Suppliers must clear away confusion about tariffs and how information is presented. People must be able to understand their bills and to make confident decisions on tariffs. The hon. Member for Billericay said that changes are clearly needed on tariffs, and the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) illustrated from his reading of the booklet what a nightmare the current system is. We are all clear about that.

As the hon. Member for Billericay said, the regulator has proposed new obligations on suppliers to provide clearer information to their customers, and specifically a standard annual statement, including the tariff name, the customer's consumption, a reminder of the right to switch, and simplified information on tariffs to make comparisons easier, including a clear price scorecard, although I know that the hon. Gentleman expressed some scepticism about that.

The hon. Gentleman made a good argument on the need to simplify and clarify tariffs. Being able to make a comparison with similar homes would undoubtedly be a useful way for people to satisfy themselves that they were getting a fair deal, and that they were doing the right thing. Most people want to do the right thing—they want to save energy for the benefit of their pocket and also to help the climate—but they are not in a good position to know whether they are doing the best for themselves and for society at large.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that each consumer should have information about the cheapest rate for them. Clearly, that would be ideal, but the problem is how to achieve it, and the work is already under way by Ofgem.

Simon Hughes: Will the Minister address whether the normal consumer would believe that the organisation best equipped to give them independent and accurate advice about the best option for them is the supplier who wants their custom, or someone who is not connected with the supplier, such as someone engaged by the local authority or an independent agency?

Joan Ruddock: It may sound attractive to have someone who is independent, but that might introduce enormous complexity. The energy supplier in a competitive market wants to attract customers and to keep them, so they have an interest in serving them well. The disappointment about the competitive market at the moment is that, as we have all agreed, people cannot even work out whether they are getting the best deal. It is crucial to making the system operate that the energy companies are obliged to produce the information.

The hon. Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) said that people should be able to discover how much energy is used by different appliances, such as leaving the TV on standby. We are working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on sustainable consumption and production, and particularly in Europe, to obtain more labelling schemes, reductions in appliances' energy use, choice editing by retailers, and to enable customers to make relevant choices. Whether all that information could be supplied directly by energy companies is questionable, the obvious reason being the extent of the booklet. We must not put more and more requirements on energy companies, but we must ensure that we enable people—retailers have a huge role to play in this and have been helpful—to make the best choices in reducing their energy consumption wherever possible.

The hon. Member for Billericay referred to the Which? report and recommendations, which I have looked at in preparation for this debate. That organisation has taken a useful role by engaging more customers in the debate and coming forward with a host of proposals. We need to keep up the pressure, which I welcome wherever it comes from. I hope that all the recommendations were made to Ofgem in the consultation that closed recently, which is where such matters can be properly explored.

The remarks of the Secretary of State and my predecessor, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), in relation to the hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill stand. We want his ideas to be fed into the system and for something better to come out of it. We are not using Ofgem as a shield and are working with the regulator that this Government put in place. Ofgem is there to do a job, which it is doing. It was asked to make proposals that will give consumers more confidence when changing suppliers and to give a guarantee that the process will be safe. It is clearly nonsense if people go through a process to get a better deal and end up with a worse one.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey asked how many hon. Members have changed supplier. The hon. Member for Wealden admitted that he had done so, but had not got a cheaper tariff, and I

[Joan Ruddock]

have shared his experience. We probably made the same switch on to a green tariff, and we probably pay the highest prices as a consequence. I will be satisfied with that if the company produces additional green energy beyond what would have come about as part of the supplier obligations under renewables obligations certificates. I am currently trying to find that out.

Mr. Baron: May I gently put the Minister on the spot? We all accept that Ofgem is looking at a range of proposals. We welcome that and want to be part of the process. However, as I highlighted in my speech, my simple proposal goes one step further than what Ofgem is considering. The Government have said that they welcome that proposal and are actively considering it. However, it is not clear what they will do about it. She has quoted Ofgem at me, but Ofgem is falling short of my proposal. What will the Government do with regard to my proposal?

Joan Ruddock: We are considering all matters raised in the hon. Gentleman's proposals, the Which? report and this debate. The suggestion was made that I send a copy of this debate to Ofgem, and I will do so. However, we must allow Ofgem to do its job. It would be premature to give a commitment to adopt any ideas—including the hon. Gentleman's—however fine they are, because we have given Ofgem a job to do. When we see the results, we will be in a position to say whether we are satisfied. We have made it clear that we want satisfaction, fairness, transparency and the fair deal that consumers have not been getting. It was assumed that privatisation would give consumers a fair deal, but it has not. We are all impatient for improvements.

Simon Hughes: I hope that I am not misrepresenting the hon. Member for Billericay in asking the Minister to join us in asking Ofgem to consult on its provisional view before it is finalised. That would be welcome.

Joan Ruddock: I have made a note of the hon. Gentleman's point and will consider it. There are processes and protocols that must be followed. However, we ought to be in a position to have a meeting. It would also make sense to hold an all-party meeting, if the Front-Bench spokesmen would like to.

It was necessary for the regulator to consult on these issues because that is the appropriate vehicle for taking account of the views of everyone concerned. That is the process that we are currently going through.

I was asked what the criteria for success will be and how I will monitor them. As we have all rehearsed, one criterion for success is whether the consumer has information that helps them to understand their bills and to make the appropriate behavioural changes. As suggested by Which?, another test will be whether the public opinion of Ofgem and the energy companies changes. Public opinion of the companies is currently poor. The companies would appreciate a change in public opinion, so it is in the interests of everyone that we work together to sort this matter out.

In the follow-up to its probe, Ofgem examined standards in doorstep selling. In my constituency, Deptford Action Group for the Elderly frequently complains that people going door to door—particularly to the doors of elderly people—are quite aggressive in trying to persuade people to sign up to new tariffs on the spot. There is concern that people will feel intimidated and might make the wrong choices. We know that many have made wrong choices, although I am not suggesting that they were bullied into doing so. We therefore appreciate Ofgem's examination of the standards in doorstep selling. It has proposed new rules to require suppliers to offer written quotations following doorstep sales and to provide that the offer made on the doorstep is better than the customer's existing deal. That is another important step forward. All the steps that have been taken could prove to be important in giving consumers confidence that they are paying fair prices for their energy.

No matter how much information consumers have, their main concern is the size of bills, particularly given last year's dramatic price rises. The Government have made it clear that we expect reductions in the wholesale costs for energy companies to be passed on to the consumer. We have required Ofgem to track the link between wholesale and household prices so that there is more transparency. That will be reported to us on a quarterly basis. We are keeping a close eye on that, especially as oil prices have recently risen again. I appreciate the concerns of all hon. Members who have spoken in support of their constituents and urge everyone to keep up the pressure.

Although we all want affordable energy, energy companies should publish on their bills the extent of the payments that are made in support of renewable energy and the transition to a low-carbon economy, as the hon. Member for Wealden has proposed. We are committed to moving to a low-carbon economy, increasing our renewable energy supplies and meeting the 15 per cent. target by 2020, but we must accept that that will add inevitably to the cost of fuel bills. We are developing policies to make that journey as cost-effective as possible. We are putting in place policies and regulations that help consumers take action.

We believe that smart meters, which have been referred to by all hon. Members in this debate, can contribute significantly to that aim and be cost-effective. They can help us change our energy habits in the short term and provide a stepping-stone to the smart grids of the future. Smart meters will empower all consumers, enabling them to monitor their energy use and reduce consumption, which will help them to save money as well as reduce carbon emissions. There will be no more of the estimated bills that particularly irritate those people, such as hon. Members, who can never be at home for the meter to be read. I had estimated bills for years, and then, amazingly, my energy company found that my gas meter had not even been working. There are great hazards in estimated bills, and I probably suffered one of the worst of those. Not being able to stay home for readings is a real problem, and we need to move beyond it as quickly as we can.

We have announced, as hon. Members know, the roll-out of smart meters. I know that there is frustration, because we have said that the total roll-out will take us until 2020, but it is a major infrastructure project. We have more than 20 million homes, and we must get it right. We want to put in the equipment that will do the best, most comprehensive and most efficient job. That is why there is a consultation period before the roll-out.

We are determined to bring smart meters forward through a system whose design will bring the best value to everyone involved.

The hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey made several points, and I have not dealt with them all yet. I thank him for his congratulations. I agree that it is disappointing that we cannot congratulate Millwall this year, but there is next year. He suggested—I think that I have already responded on this point—that when Ofgem has established a preliminary view, it should consult on it. I am happy to take that proposal on board. He accepted the need for a competitive industry in Europe, and I agree with him that there has not been sufficient liberalisation of the continental energy market. It is not a case of our turning back, but rather of seeing that more is done in continental Europe. He said that a smart meter is the answer to getting the best tariff, and, as I have just explained, we all hope that we will be able to go down that path.

The hon. Gentleman spoke at length about social tariffs and suggested that a subsidised rate might be possible for all vulnerable groups, which he defined as pensioners, disability living allowance recipients and people with children. We have social tariffs at present, which last year cost energy companies £100 million. This year, they will cost £125 million, and next year they will cost £150 million—they cover 800,000 people. The categories of people to whom the hon. Gentleman referred would run into many millions—possibly tens of millions. The difficulty with subsidised tariffs, as opposed to lowest tariffs, is that they require someone else to fund the subsidy. That would be either the Government, directly, or, as at present, the energy companies. The more we use subsidy to prevent or help people out of fuel poverty, the more we risk tipping others into fuel poverty. That is why the social tariff model outlined by the hon. Gentleman would not work. However, that is not to say that we are not extremely interested in, and carefully considering, social tariffs. We appreciate that many people have urged us to mandate for social tariffs.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that there should be publications in newspapers twice a year. That is a very interesting idea—as is anything simple that we can do that people can rely on. The question is whether the simplicity that the hon. Gentleman proposed can be achieved. He spoke about the night rate and said that the hours are not even the same for every company, and I agree that it would be sensible if those were brought into line. Everyone made a plea for a simpler system; I agree, and we must try to achieve it.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether I agree that energy companies should show embedded carbon. The idea is interesting. We need people to understand the concept of embedded carbon to bring about more behaviour change. However, we say that we want bills to be simpler and clearer, and I am not certain to what extent we should add information. I agree that we need the population to have access to the information, but we perhaps need to be more imaginative about where it is best for that information to sit—sometimes it sits best with the appliance or consumer goods, when they are purchased. We are working, through the Carbon Trust, with several major retailers, to do carbon footprinting and look at embedded carbon.

I want to deal briefly with fuel poverty, to which I have referred in relation to subsidised social tariffs. All consumers need and deserve help and protection, but there is clearly a particular need for safeguards for people who are fuel-poor. The hon. Member for Wealden said that we should not have targets without a road map by which to achieve them. When the fuel poverty strategy was devised, we were in a very different world. It was hugely successful in the early days, and between 1996 and 2004 fuel poverty was reducing steadily. In that time, we brought 4.5 million households out of fuel poverty. It is rising energy prices since 2004 that have reversed that progress. For the Government that means redoubling our efforts. Since 2000, we have spent £20 billion helping the fuel-poor in this country, through a number of initiatives. Yet despite those efforts, and despite our being the only country in the world with a fuel poverty strategy, fuel poverty has increased.

I am fully aware of the challenge, which is why I am undertaking a review of our fuel poverty policies. The review examines whether existing measures to tackle fuel poverty could be made more effective. It considers whether new policies should be introduced to help us make further progress, particularly in the light of market conditions to which we have referred already and our aim of reducing carbon emissions. The initial findings of the review will be available later in the summer. I am glad that the hon. Member for Wealden agrees with us about the complexity of trying to sort out the mechanisms by which we can further assist people who need assistance, and about the fact that the targeting and method are critical. We are carefully examining, as hon. Members have suggested, the way information is shown, so that we can improve targeting. We accept that the Government have a role and that it is not all down to energy companies.

We need always to be vigilant on behalf of the consumer. We cannot be complacent about the service that paying energy customers receive, and we should aim for that to be the best and fairest service possible. Regulation needs to be active and effective in current conditions. Rules must be amended, where necessary, to stop unfair practices creeping in again in future, and to help consumers make sound decisions. I appreciate the interest that has been taken by all hon. Members who have contributed today. It is obvious that there is much common ground between us. We all share the aims that the hon. Member for Billericay put forward in the debate. I am grateful to him for doing that, and I look forward to working with everyone to advance the cause and get a much better deal for consumers from their energy supply companies.

Mrs. Masuma Jariwalla

10.59 am

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I begin by thanking Mr. Speaker for granting me this 30-minute Westminster Hall debate to discuss the case of my constituent, Mrs. Masuma Jariwalla.

Mrs. Jariwalla first came to see me at my advice surgery in May 2003. She is a Shi'a Muslim, who was born and married into the Dawoodi Bohra sect. She divorced her husband under English civil law in 1995. The couple have two sons, who are now both over 18. My constituent told me that her ex-husband, a strict religious Shi'a, will not accept that divorce as binding on him, but will consider himself divorced only if he divorces her under Shi'a law. She has a new partner, a Sunni Muslim, but he cannot marry her nor can his parents accept her into the family unless her ex-husband releases her by accepting the English civil divorce or divorces her under Shi'a law. It seemed to me in 2003, and nothing has been achieved to change my mind since then, that I could not help her so long as her ex-husband refused a Shi'a divorce and she, as a religious woman, wished to remain bound by Shi'a laws, which she clearly respects, unless the Government change the law.

Following our first meeting, I corresponded with a number of Ministers on her behalf, to see whether the Government would be able to help, perhaps directly by amending the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, or indirectly by amending the Divorce (Religious Marriages) Act 2002, or even by passing new legislation to deal with this impasse. I appreciate that Government and Parliament, although sensitive even to a small number of difficult cases, must be careful to consider the wider implications of making statutory changes to the religious customs and laws of a religion of any denomination with which it has no proper business to interfere.

In June 2003, Lord Filkin, then the Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Constitutional Affairs, replied to a letter that I had written in May to the right hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), then a junior minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department. Lord Filkin accepted that my constituent was locked into a state of affairs similar to some Jewish chained wives, who are prevented from remarrying because of their husband's refusal to grant a religious divorce or get. If the husband does not apply to the Beth Din for a get and deliver it to his wife, she cannot remarry under Jewish law. The Divorce (Religious Marriages) Act, which came into force in 2003, provided some assistance by enabling the English divorce courts to require the dissolution of the religious marriage before granting a civil divorce. That means that a husband who refuses to deliver a get to his wife will not be able to obtain a civil divorce and lawfully remarry. That provision is fine so far as it goes, but it does not assist my constituent.

Mrs. Jariwalla's plight may be numerically unusual, but the size of the orthodox religious Jewish population is large and the number of divorces in that community must, for a host of religious and social reasons internal to that community, be correspondingly small. However, the problem was sufficient to cause the Government to recognise that some measure of reform was required to allow for social harmony and compliance with our obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights.

Lord Filkin accepted that my constituent and other Muslim women faced a similar problem to that faced by the Jewish women, whose husbands refused to grant them the talaq, whose rights and interests were enhanced by the 2002 Act. Mrs. Jariwalla, as a British citizen, was and remains divorced under the law of England but trapped by sharia law in a marriage to which she has no real or emotional attachment.

There are, of course, any number of differences between Islam and Judaism. However, I suggest that as the Muslim population of the United Kingdom grows year by year, and as a greater proportion of that population are and will be British-born rather than foreign-born, and as the cultural, religious and geographical links that bound first and even second-generation Muslim families are attenuated by the exposure of the younger, indigenous generations to the social mores and cultural systems prevalent in the majority population of British citizens, the tensions between English civil and Muslim religious law will increase, and need to be alleviated.

As within the Christian faith, there will always be groups and individuals for whom the religious teachings and tenets of their own faith take precedence over secular civil law, no matter how problematic that can be. However, there will be a cohort of Muslim women brought up within one world from which they do not want entirely to be separated who, in order to live happy and fulfilling lives in modern Britain, need to be able to exist in harmony within both a religious and a secular context.

Since 2003, as well as contacting the two Ministers to whom I have already referred, I contacted Lady Ashton of Upholland and the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who were then Ministers at the Department for Constitutional Affairs. Like Lord Filkin, they said that they could do nothing unless it became clear that there was consensus within the Muslim community, and that the reason why Muslims could not be included under the 2002 Act was that their communities were not able to offer efficient remedies to deal with the problem—and, anyway, that women like my constituent could always approach the sharia council to ask for the marriage to be dissolved. Furthermore, the Government had received no representations from the Muslim community, which they had from the Jewish community.

I am grateful for the Under-Secretary's attendance here today. She will know that the two great sects in Islam are the Sunni and the Shi'a Muslims, with Sunnis predominating by some measure. The Muslim Council of Britain is the umbrella body covering the many Muslim councils and sub-councils to be found in this country. These councils can resolve marriage disputes such as my constituent's by issuing a fatwa, but I understand that Dawoodi Bohra wives, like the pre-2002 Act Jewish wives, cannot remarry unless their husbands consent to a religious divorce.

In the autumn of 2008, I wrote to the Janaab Amilsaheb of the Anjuman-e-Saifee in Leicester and to Dr. Idris Zainuddin in Northolt, the relevant Dawoodi Bohra religious leaders, to ask them to intercede in this case. Apart from a polite holding reply from Leicester that

promised a considered response from Northolt, and despite reminders, I have heard no more from either of them.

I wrote to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham again in January this year, in her capacity as Minister for Woman; in February the Under-Secretary replied. She told me nothing new. With Mrs. Jariwalla's consent, I bring the matter to the House in the hope that any publicity generated by this debate will act as a spur to action within the Muslim community and among the Government.

It is far too late for the 2002 Act to include my constituent's case, as she was long ago granted a decree absolute under English law. There is nothing to be gained in preventing her ex-husband from getting a civil divorce in order to stop him lawfully remarrying, because he already has a divorce and, if he chooses, he can remarry.

If one party has the power to grant or withhold a religious divorce, the power can be abused and used as a bargaining tool to pressure the other party to agree to less favourable terms for residence and contact with children, and for financial provision. That is no longer relevant in this 14-year-old case, but surely neither the Government or Parliament should countenance a continuing conflict between her ex-husband's refusal to grant a religious divorce and Mrs. Jariwalla's rights to family life under article 8 of the European convention on human rights, her rights to freedom of conscience and religion under article 9, her right to marry under article 12, her right to equality between spouses under article 4 of the 7th protocol to the convention, her right not to suffer discrimination in the exercise of her convention rights under article 14 of the convention, and her right to an effective remedy to protect her rights under article 13. Similar provisions are to be found in the United Nations universal declaration on human rights, which the United Kingdom voted for as long ago as 1948, and in other more recent treaties to which we are a party.

Of course, we respect the separation between religion and politics, which rightly inhibits Governments from interfering in the practice of religion unless the behaviour of one or more parties is in breach of the local civil or criminal law. However, that is what we have here: the current power held over this woman by her ex-husband is an abuse of her rights as a citizen under the law, and the Government have a duty to put it right. They can no longer wait for consensus within the Muslim community, or for that community to approach the Government.

As a matter of public policy, of fairness, of humanity and of justice, I urge the Government, through the Minister, to apply whatever pressure and influence they can to impress upon the Dawoodi Bohra authorities the need to allow Mrs. Jariwalla—talaq or no talaq—to be freed from this long-dead marriage.

11.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Bridget Prentice): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Russell. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) on securing this debate, in which he has outlined Masuma Jariwalla's poignant and long-running case. As he explained, he has already brought it to my attention and that of a number of my predecessors. I also want to place on the record my sincere and absolute sympathy for Ms Jariwalla.

I shall explain in a little detail the principles behind sharia law and then try to address some of the issues raised by the hon. and learned Gentleman. Sharia law is the code of personal religious law governing the conduct of Muslims, and, as he pointed out, Ms Jariwalla, and many others in this country, have chosen to live by it and wish to continue to do so. Sharia law is not part of the law of England and Wales and nor do the Government have any intention of changing that position. We believe that social cohesion is best served by people living together under one legal system, rather than a system of personal laws.

The hon. and learned Gentleman rightly points out that it is not Government's business to legislate to change the laws and customs of a religion; the business of Government is to frame appropriate laws for the country, within which personal choice to practise a religion or follow a religious law can be exercised. We would not want to interfere in the right of people to live their lives according to their religion. Nothing in the law in England and Wales prevents people from abiding by sharia principles if they wish to do so, provided that it does not conflict with the law in England and Wales. If it did, the law in England and Wales would prevail.

The hon. and learned Gentleman asked what the Government can do to bring the predicament of Ms Jariwalla, and possibly others like her, in line with modern British life. He referred to changes made through section 10A of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973. That provision applies to the Jewish faith, and to any other prescribed faith whose representatives apply to the Lord Chancellor to be brought within the scope of the Act. Since the provision came into force in 2003, no other religious group has sought to bring its faith within the scope of the Act. However, given what he has said, I now feel that it might be incumbent on me to suggest to other religious groups that they might like to consider being brought within its scope, rather than to wait for them to come forward. Obviously, it is not my role to persuade them to do so, but I could at least bring the provision to their attention and ask them to think about whether it would be appropriate for them.

Having said that, in Ms Jariwalla's case, section 10A might not be the answer. The section enables a court to refuse a decree absolute until a recalcitrant spouse has undertaken the necessary steps to enable the parties to obtain a religious divorce. It does not purport to change religious law; it simply enables the civil law divorce to be withheld until the parties have dissolved the marriage in accordance with their religion. In Jewish law, divorce requires the co-operation of both parties. The husband secures a get from the religious court, which is then delivered to the wife. If he refuses to do so, the wife might be able to obtain a divorce under civil law. However, because she would remain married to her husband, in the eyes of Jewish law, she would not be entitled to remarry in an orthodox ceremony. If she is devout, that inhibition might be a major source of distress and unhappiness for her and her family.

Section 10A is of use, however, only if the husband wants a civil divorce. Under the Jewish faith, the man is free to marry again, having been granted a civil divorce, even without obtaining a religious divorce. If he wishes to remarry, he can obtain a civil divorce, so section 10A could be an incentive to the husband to provide the wife with the necessary get by allowing that civil divorce to

[Bridget Prentice]

be withheld until the get is provided. However, section 10A would be ineffective against a spouse who has no interest in obtaining a civil divorce. And that is as true of a Jewish religious marriage as of any other.

The hon. and learned Gentleman rightly said that the numerical size of the problem is not the issue—we are probably talking about very small numbers of people. The problem is that section 10A is ineffective in any situation in which the spouse resisting religious divorce has no interest in the dissolution of a civil marriage. Ms Jariwalla's situation might be similar to those of some Jewish women, but it is not identical, so I am not convinced that section 10A would provide a solution in every case.

The Government have stated that they will consider representation from Islamic communities and organisations to extend section 10A to that religious group. However, that can be done only if it wishes to bring its faith within the scope of the Act. I shall ensure that we remind it of that provision; and it might then wish to consider making representations to be brought within its scope. Having said that, none of this detracts from the very real problems highlighted by Ms Jariwalla's case and the difficulties of managing a modern life for people of different religions in this country.

The hon. and learned Gentleman rightly and sensitively recognised the need to be very careful about how we best regulate these issues through legislation. He raised the concern that the power to grant or withhold a religious divorce could be used as an unfair bargaining counter in disputes over contact, residence or financial provision. Undoubtedly, it could so be used, but I hope that I can assure him—and you, Mr. Russell—that should parties bring such a matter before a court in England and Wales, any suggested agreement would be vigorously scrutinised by that court, under English legal principles, to ensure that what is agreed meets, for example, the interests of any children and corresponds to appropriate divisions of finances under English law.

The hon. and learned Gentleman then suggested that refusal by one spouse to grant a religious divorce can amount to interference with the other spouse's human rights. He, more than many, is aware that human rights issues are very complex—much more so than often appears at face value. I am not yet convinced, however, that this situation raises a human rights issue in the terms that he suggests. Under European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence, marriage is not held to be a form of expression of thought, conscience or religion, such as would attract the protection of article 9. Marriage comes under article 12, which provides for the right to marry according to national laws governing the exercise of that right. I am not convinced that the desire to remarry, not through a civil ceremony, but according to religious formats not recognised in English law, would necessarily come under article 12.

Having said that, I do not want to detract from the seriousness with which we take these issues. In this country, many different nationalities, cultures and faiths live cheek by jowl and generally harmoniously. That brings many advantages and enriches our communities. We are taking steps to tackle issues faced by Muslims in modern Britain. For example, we have commissioned a small-scale research project to investigate the number and distribution of sharia councils in England and Wales. It will determine how easy it is to obtain information from councils and, where possible, explore administrative structures and the processes for dealing with sharia family law matters.

We have set up the national Muslim women's advisory group and the young Muslim advisory group, and we have supported more than 120 Muslim women and young people through leadership programmes. We have also supported the establishment of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board and the radical middle way roadshows, which have been attended by more than 70,000 people. We are very aware of the issues surrounding religious marriages that do not comply with the formal requirements included in the Marriage Act 1949. I am particularly concerned about cases in which people marry in a purely religious ceremony, because the marriage can be invalid as a matter of civil law if it has not been subject to the rights and responsibilities that accompany legally recognised marriages in England and Wales. I want to ensure that sharia councils around the country realise that mosques need to be registered according to English law in order to validate such marriages.

We appreciate that women can be very vulnerable after the breakdown of a relationship, and we are considering how we can work with Muslim communities and organisations to increase awareness of the legal requirements for recognised marriage and to increase the number of mosques that are registered for the solemnisation of religious marriage. The 1949 Act provides for places of worship to apply to be registered for the solemnisation of religious marriages. That requirement applies to all religious marriages, whether Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Hindu, Sikh and so on.

I appreciate the way in which the hon. and learned Gentleman has put this case forward. I have absolute sympathy with Ms Jariwalla in her unacceptable situation. The hon. and learned Gentleman will know that the Government are not dealing with the Muslim Council of Britain at the moment. However, I am keen to make contact with the Dawoodi Bohra religious leaders to ensure that this case is brought to their attention.

Mr. Garnier: May I thank the Minister by means of an intervention? I would have made a second speech if it were permitted, but I am not entirely sure of the procedure. Before she sits down, I want to thank her for the positive way in which she has dealt with this case. Although it is very sensitive, it does have lessons of general application. One of the things that I am delighted to hear is that she will now go out into the Muslim community to encourage it—I hope that I am not putting words into her mouth—to come within the Divorce (Religious Marriages) Act 2002. However, even if the Muslim community comes within that Act it will not help my constituent; that divorce has gone and been dealt with.

I urge the Minister to put her words into action and to demonstrate leadership from the Government. It is only by influencing and interacting with the Muslim community—it is not necessarily about changing laws—that it will realise that it has to come out of its inward-looking world and into the wider, modern British context. I will not have a debate with the Minister now about the niceties of human rights legislation and jurisprudence,

but I appreciate that many of the cases that go before the court are fact-specific as opposed to of wider and general application.

Bridget Prentice: May I tell the hon. and learned Gentleman that I will do as he outlined? As for the human rights aspect, I will look closely at articles 9 and 12 and see whether there is any scope there. I will make a commitment to him that I will go out to the Muslim community and ask it to consider coming within the scope of the 2002 Act. I accept that such a change does not affect Ms Jariwalla's case and I will want to see whether there are any other avenues down which we can go to help her in particular and others of whom we are not yet aware.

Mr. Garnier: Will the Minister report back to the House, or in some other public way, in six months' time and tell us the results of her interactions with the Muslim community?

Bridget Prentice: I most certainly will, and I will keep the hon. and learned Gentleman informed of any progress that we make in the course of any discussions with the Muslim community. Any advice that he wishes to give me in the course of doing so will be very gratefully received.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Youth Crime

[Miss Anne Begg *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North) (Lab): I am pleased to have been successful in obtaining the debate. A large part of the reason why I wanted to initiate it on the back of the publication last week of the report by the Select Committee on Home Affairs entitled "Knife Crime" was that agencies and individuals in my constituency made a very important contribution to that report. At the time, I did not appreciate that there was going to be an Opposition day debate on knife crime last night—a debate in which I took part. As an aside, I originally applied for a debate on knife crime, then made a positive decision to change the title to "Youth Crime". I have been given to understand that the initial debate last night in Opposition time was to be on youth crime but was changed to one on knife crime. That is quite important in its way, in that there is a broader reason why I wanted to speak on the subject this afternoon. Knife crime is understandably the focus of much of the thinking on youth crime because of its lethality and the very high profile that it has had in the last couple of years, but it should never be considered in isolation from the broader issues of crime and young people. That means considering young people as perpetrators, victims and, not infrequently, both at the same time—a theme that I shall develop.

Knife crime is the most dramatic embodiment of a larger and much more complex pattern of youth behaviour, ranging from the emotional element that is so much a characteristic of many teenagers—the fear that many young people feel on the streets, and the bravado—to the relationships dimension. What we call gangs can range from a very loose network of affiliations to a much more structured gang that is sometimes involved in quite hard criminal activity such as drugs. Gang attachment underpins and sometimes even replaces family support, particularly on the streets. Then we come to the policy questions, involving decisions about school exclusions and what happens to young people after they have displayed a pattern of offending behaviour. Then we come to the broader material factors of poverty, inequality and the means by which tough neighbourhoods come into being and people are sometimes trapped in a cycle of violence and criminal behaviour. We do not tend to talk about this in the same breath as youth crime, but also relevant are the patterns of adult criminal behaviour, particularly relating to the drugs trade, the trade in stolen goods and so on, to which young people can be actively recruited or in which they can be trapped.

All those characteristics come together to form a wider pattern of youth crime, with knife crime at the extreme end. We often focus on that too much, at the expense of the wider context. We cannot understand knife crime without understanding young people and criminal behaviour more generally, and that cannot be understood in a context that divides young people into two distinct categories: the so-called innocent or good young people and the bad, who are often described in quite stunning language, particularly, although not only, in the media. I am talking about the depiction of a yob culture and young children being feral and part of an underclass.

[Ms Karen Buck]

The truth is that at any given time the overwhelming majority of young people are not involved in a gang or criminal behaviour. A YouGov poll last year, which I think was commissioned by Barnardo's, revealed that the public believe that young people are responsible for half of all crimes committed, when in fact the figure is about 12 per cent., so we start with that enormous overestimate of the extent of young people's responsibility for crime. The report by the Select Committee, of which I am a member, found that 5 per cent. of young people commit 50 per cent. of all the crimes committed by that age group, so the core number of offenders is relatively small.

We also know that, overall, crime levels have fallen. I was pleased to see an acknowledgement of that fact in the briefing by Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London. It confirmed a 17 per cent. fall in crime in London in the past five years and a 10 per cent. fall in violence in the last year. However, as can be confirmed by any parent of a teenager in particular—I speak as one—the truth is that a great deal more is going on out there in the streets, estates and schools than the flat statistics show. We do not really know, because we do not have the information to make a judgment, how much more crime there is between young people or whether there is less, and how much of that can be explained by the availability of gadgets—mobile phones, iPods and so on—which makes an individual a desirable target for robbery. There is an awful lot that we do not know, but we do know that although the high-profile violent crimes have fallen generally, there is a very serious problem on our streets involving young people.

The boundaries between the innocent and the guilty are far more fluid than our policy makers, at all levels, tend to be able to respond to. There is a fluidity between the victim and the perpetrator, between the serious and the occasional offender and between the people who are not caught or convicted of a crime and those who are deemed to be innocent. Behaviour that we can criminalise and describe as criminal now would not necessarily have been criminalised a few decades ago. Many people are involved in lower-level criminal behaviour and antisocial behaviour, but that information is never brought to public attention. The overwhelming majority of those young people grow up and grow out of it. Age is a critical factor and getting work is often a critical factor in that. I worry—this came through in the Select Committee report—that there is a rigidity in the way in which the media describe youth crime and in the way we as policy makers often respond to it.

I shall now consider some of the issues as they are reflected in my own area. North Westminster, in common with many inner-city areas, faces three challenges. First, far too many young people are anxious or frightened on the streets and far too many—probably most—have had at least one bad experience that confirms them in that view. Secondly, there has been some evidence of gang activity in the past couple of years. I am, however, pleased to say, having met senior police officers yesterday, that the situation that was emerging over the past couple of summers seems to be calmer. There has been effective police action and other preventive action that may have helped us to deal with that, but only a fool would be complacent about the gang-related behaviour that we have seen and that is deeply entrenched in some parts of our cities. I do not believe that there are many communities that are wholly immune from that. Fashion tends to be a factor in these things and there is a fashion for postcode-dominated gang-related behaviour at the moment. It would be naive of us to believe that these things cannot emerge in Westminster, Kensington or Camden, albeit at the moment they are not as developed there as they are in some other areas.

There are three families mourning young men who have died as a result of knife crime in my constituency in the not-too-distant past. The men who died were Kodjo Yenga, Jevon Henry and Amro Elbadawi. As tiny as that figure is, each person represents a tragedy of awesome proportions. It is absolutely incumbent on us not to minimise the scale of the challenge that we must confront.

Thirdly, there are frequent flare-ups of antisocial behaviour and lower-level criminal activity involving young people. Sometimes they involve the same people who are involved in some of the loose gang networks, and sometimes not. Some young people are victims; some young people's behaviour towards other young people spills over into criminal behaviour and some young people are involved in behaviour that, at its extreme, can destroy the lives of the people who are on the receiving end of it. We have to accept that truth.

The local Uncut project, which is part of wider network called Working With Men, has worked with more than 1,000 young people locally. I was pleased that the project brought young people from a number of schools and youth organisations into Parliament to talk to our Committee. The presentation made difficult hearing. They were a delightful bunch of young people and I knew many of them. The majority of young people whom Uncut consulted knew someone who was carrying a knife, but very few would be comfortable repeating that information. The reluctance of young people to report what they know and what they have experienced, even when they have been victims, to the police and others is one of the most critical problems that we face. Many of those consulted did not feel safe and most felt that weapons were carried in response to fear, although they felt that peer pressure and robbery motivation were factors. Many felt that the situation was getting worse. In fact, the pessimism of some young people was one of the most striking elements of the presentation.

Although it is sometimes hard to know how people interact in an event such as the presentation, and some element of fashion influences how they will respond and present their problems, there is a genuine issue. We have heard that many times, particularly from people in our most challenged communities where opportunities are fewest. Uncut and many similar projects do phenomenally important work. They make shock tactics much more effective than they would be if they were pursued, for example, by MPs or senior police officers, because they have a valuable closeness to the community. I commend to hon. Members a superb short film that Uncut showed the Committee. It was based on the Mozart estate and in some ways reflected the tragedy of Amro Elbadawi's death. It was very well received by young people, unlike some of the "talking heads" warnings that they receive.

However, the truth is that projects such as Uncut cannot serve everyone who needs early intervention, mentoring or shock tactics, even in an area such as north Paddington. The early intervention work with

families that is being delivered in partnership with the youth offending team and others with Government support is excellent and intensive, but the requirements are far greater. That is not a criticism, but an expression of the mismatch between need and the delivery of services.

At a time when we face retrenchment in public spending, it is vital that we do not abandon support for a spectrum of measures, many of which were discussed by the young people themselves. I shall go through some of the things that the young people articulated. First, young people themselves want to feel safe on the streets, but many do not feel safe. That is the overwhelmingly powerful message. Safer neighbourhood policing is absolutely fundamental to that, and it has been a hugely important and successful development in many areas. It must be defended and we must, above all, ensure that we are putting safer neighbourhood policing resources into the areas that need them most. There is an inequality, rather than an equality, of need, and we must target accordingly.

Secondly, the continuing problem of the dysfunctional relationship between the police and too many young people needs to be addressed. Stop and search is a vital tool in effective policing, but as the police, including the Met, have recognised, inadequately targeted or badly handled searches by response teams are counter-productive—sadly, this often happens with response teams who are not familiar with a neighbourhood or the people in the community. Such searches in large part explain exactly why we are unable to get the reporting and flow of information that we need.

For example, only three in every 100 stop-and-search stops in London involving young people in the year before last resulted in a knife being found—the number went down to 1 per cent. last year. I calculate that more than 280,000 stops took place last year, disproportionately involving black and minority ethnic communities, without anything significant being found. That is a genuine problem. That does not call into question the stop-and-search tactic in principle—it can have an important deterrent effect—but we must keep the measure under constant review. To a certain extent, that has happened, which is welcome, but it must continue. We need to give an even higher priority to managing the conduct and relationships of some police. It is difficult. A 22-year-old police officer could find themselves facing a big strapping 18-year-old who is giving them a bit of lip. It is not an easy relationship, but we need to work on making it better.

Thirdly, co-ordination and communication between agencies is vital, and it is still not as good as it should be. Good schools are not arms of the police force, but good policing is vital to effective schooling. The same goes for the youth service. It is difficult to over-estimate how important it is to have stable, embedded police working well in schools. Weaker and less trusting relationships with agencies such as the youth service and the police are counter-productive.

In that context, we need to ensure that there is downward pressure on school exclusions. That is a policy difference between Labour and the Conservative party, which tends to look at how we could make it easier for schools to exclude. One understands on one level why the pressure to exclude emerges within schools, but all the evidence points to the fact that weak attachments to school and school exclusions are correlated with offending behaviour and the risk of drifting into a gang culture.

Fourthly, intensive family support must be more accessible, because domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and mental ill health among adults is a key trigger for much of the behaviour that I am talking about. Fifthly, chronic overcrowding in our housing stock drives young people on to the streets. Westminster has some of the highest levels of overcrowding in the country. Although it would be crass to draw a causal link between offending behaviour and overcrowding, I have not the slightest doubt—I know this from extensive experience—that the stresses that many people grow up with in their homes push them on to the streets where the risk factors are high.

Mr. Andy Slaughter (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush) (Lab): I indicated to my hon. Friend that I wished to intervene, but I am not sure that I need to because she is doing the job so well. She is showing the great knowledge and understanding that I wish all politicians had on these matters.

My hon. Friend is a constituency neighbour of mine and Kodjo Yenga, whom she mentioned, was killed in Hammersmith grove, which borders my constituency. Such things are tragic. I went to a residents meeting earlier this year following another tragic death of a young man, Craig Brown, in Loftus road. There was a huge turnout of residents and the Greater London authority, the council and so forth were there. The issue of youth crime and young people having meaningful things to do was the main thing that came out of the meeting.

Miss Anne Begg (in the Chair): Order. I am sure the hon. Gentleman could catch my eye and make these points in his own right rather than in an intervention.

Mr. Slaughter: I am sorry, Miss Begg. Partly because my voice is not as strong as it usually is and partly because I have to be elsewhere, I am unable to do that.

It is essential that there is investment and that we do not have cuts in services from either central or local government. Unfortunately, that is what is happening locally at the moment.

Ms Buck: By a happy coincidence, my next point concerns precisely that. Although no one can legitimately claim that they picked up a weapon or committed a crime because they were bored—people are sometimes represented as though they were apologising for criminal behaviour when they talk about the level of funding for services—my hon. Friend is absolutely right that inadequate or expensive out-of-school provision, whether in the evenings or during the school holidays, be it sport, entertainment, drama or other activities, does absolutely nothing to prevent antisocial behaviour or gang culture. Again, Westminster trailed in terms of after-school provision but is improving now, and the extended school programme is an important contributor. That is all discretionary spending, and there is a fear that those kinds of service are likely to bear the brunt of downward pressure in public spending.

Mr. Slaughter: To give an example that my hon. Friend might share, youth clubs are being closed in Hammersmith and Fulham borough simply so that the sites can be sold off to make money. Youth services are being cut by £100,000, and out-of-school services are being completely decimated across the borough. Conservative politicians are proud to respond with quotes such as:

"Kids do not decide to stick a piece of metal into another human being because they are bored."

That is a crass attitude.

Ms Buck: It is absolutely crass. We know that providing diversionary activities cuts crime. It is as simple as that; it has been researched. To be fair to my borough, Westminster has recognised that. I am happy to say that those services are not being cut but improved, although not as much as I would like. I worry about what might happen if the regime changes. It is right that we should provide those activities, and they must be very cheap or free if we are to make inroads into families whose disposable income in a week is inadequate to send a child to the cinema, let alone to afford a broader range of activities.

In Uncut's meeting with the Select Committee, many young people expressed the view that they would like the opportunity to earn money legitimately. We are all of slightly different ages, but it was not uncommon for people to have Saturday jobs when I was growing up. That is not common now. A lot of 16 and 17-year-olds who would like to have £20 in their pocket to pay for the cinema, football training or whatever simply cannot get jobs like that. It is a hard sell when there is an economic downturn and jobs are a problem, but it needs to be factored into people's thinking. A targeted programme of access to part-time employment for young people from tougher backgrounds would be really beneficial, and they want it. They ask for the opportunity to work.

The big picture remains inequality. That is demonstrably the case. Research carried out by the Sutton Trust and others has demonstrated a causal link between extreme inequality and crimes of violence. We cannot turn our eyes from that bigger picture, even while we rightly discuss a range of policy prescriptions. Like so many other factors, it does not excuse criminal behaviour, but it helps explain it.

Finally, my hon. Friend has helped lead me into a warning. Families and civic society are key to helping children make a successful transition into decent adulthood, but it is a dangerous illusion to believe that rolling back the state will help create strong families and communities. Indeed, it is precisely where need is greatest that civic responses are often weakest, or at least patchy and inconsistent. A slash-and-burn approach to public spending in those areas will, I fear, simply end with slashing and burning of a different and more dramatic kind.

There have been real successes in tackling crime in recent years. A whole range of agencies such as the police, voluntary and community organisations, local government and others should be encouraged in the work that they do, and it must not put at risk by either oversimplifying the problem, as is so often done, or undermining the solution.

2.54 pm

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), on obtaining this valuable debate. As she has rightly pointed out, it comes 24 hours after a debate in the main Chamber on knife crime specifically. I should make a confession: I could not contribute to that debate, not least because I was in the hon. Lady's constituency. When I tell her that I am a member of the all-party group on cricket, she will perhaps understand which particular part of the NW8 posse I was involving myself with yesterday afternoon.

The hon. Lady has made an important point. It is sad that a debate on youth crime should involve, from the Back-Bench perspective, only Members from London, as though youth crime were only an urban phenomenon. The issue is obviously close to the hearts of all of us who represent London seats, but it applies across the country. She did not quite say this, but youth crime and problems between the generations have been with us for as long as there has been history.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to stress that when we talk about youth crime, too much emphasis is placed on the idea of young people as perpetrators rather than as victims, too. Of course, throughout the generations, the victims have also included a lot of older people. Older people are fearful, perhaps with some cause, although she is also right to point out that the media make a lot of some problems and perhaps exaggerate.

The hon. Lady quoted an interesting statistic, which I had not heard before, from her experience on the Select Committee, namely that only 12 per cent. of crimes are perpetrated by young people. However, it is fair to say that some young people are more guilty than other people within our society of antisocial behaviour and a lack of civility. Those things obviously do not appear on crime statistics, but they none the less play a role in cheapening and coarsening the areas where we live.

I had not intended to do more than intervene, but I think that I shall have the Floor to myself for at least a little while longer. I both agree and disagree with the hon. Lady's concluding comments about rolling back the state. There is a difficulty. My party has rightly said that it believes in the idea of society, but society and the state are not one and the same thing. One need only look, on a related note, at the dreadful events in New Cross that came to court last week. There was the idea of a multi-agency solution, as though somehow everything could be solved through various parts of the state. All too often, those elements of the state are only as strong as their weakest link, which was one of the contributing factors in the terrible events involving the killing of two young French students who were studying in my constituency at Imperial college.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right—this is a fair criticism of elements of Conservative policy—to suggest that the answer does not lie in voluntary and charitable groups alone. Again, there are too many gaps. We are living in a very different society—maybe regrettably, maybe not—from the society of 30 or 40 years ago, when young, educated women who had started families were the leading lights of many voluntary and charitable organisations. Those days are gone, and the notion that we can return to them is, I am afraid, not borne out in practical reality.

The hon. Lady is right to discuss gang attachment as a replacement for family structures. That applies just as much in my constituency, although not to the same extent. As she well knows, there are pockets in both my constituency and the area that she hopes will become her constituency, the Bayswater and Lancaster gate area, where there are problems. Things are often clouded by many of the issues occurring cheek by jowl with some of the wealthiest real estate in our country. Many issues occur literally 50 or 100 yards away from fabulously wealthy properties, which are often part of gated communities.

I am concerned that so many incidents receive enormous media coverage simply because of the sheer randomness of what has happened. Like the hon. Lady, I speak to young people in central London, so I know that there are real fears. I hear a lot of people say that they carry a knife for their own protection rather than with any sense of aggressive intent, and on one level one can understand that concern. People are concerned not just by the media perception of knife and other crime, but by their own experience of precisely what she has described. They may have experienced incidents that were not terribly serious but that rightly made them quite fearful, such as being bullied or going off the main track near where they live and finding themselves under intense physical threat. An element of the pessimism to which she has referred may simply be because people are getting slightly older and wiser in certain ways, but that should not necessarily make us complacent going forward.

I want to touch on a few of the local issues that the hon. Lady mentioned. In our part of central London, we have had great success in working together with the community, the police and local authorities, and it is only right and fair to say, as I said before last year's mayoral election, that it is one of Mayor Livingstone's great successes, in his eight years as Mayor, that he was able to bring much of that together with the safer neighbourhoods initiative. I am glad that our Conservative Mayor, Boris Johnson, is working on that seriously. There seems to have been a smooth, almost seamless, transition between the mayoralties in that regard.

The single most important element of much of the safer neighbourhoods initiative in London has been the work of local authorities. To be fair, the hon. Lady rightly pointed out that Westminster council has had great success in that area with many initiatives such as the one city initiative and the civic renewal initiative. Looking into the future, I hope those initiatives will mean that, insofar as there are to be budgetary cuts, this area will have a strong priority, even if it is not entirely ring-fenced. She is absolutely right to say that policing needs must be localised, particularly given the controversy surrounding stop-and-search. I think that stop-and-search is justifiable in many ways, but she is right that a localised sense of trust needs to be built up, so that any flash points can be sorted out relatively quickly.

I accept what the hon. Lady has said about overcrowding, but there are no easy solutions to that problem, not least when one looks at the situation with social housing organisations and associations. Many of them say that any additional private flats that come on to the market—the property market has gone through some travails in the past couple of years—are sub-standard, in relation to overcrowding, for their purposes. That is a major issue, which I hope that all the parties understand. There is no doubt that living in flats or apartments may contribute to a stressful cocktail, particularly for young men who have a lot of surplus energy that needs to be got rid of.

For the past two years, I have been the president of the St. Andrew's club, which is a quarter of a mile—literally a stone's throw—away from here, in Old Pye street, which is part of the Abbey Orchard estate. I am glad that the new lord mayor of Westminster, Councillor Duncan Sandys, who happens to represent that ward, has made it his big charity of the year. It is the oldest youth club—it was a boys club when it was set up in the 1870s, but it now takes girls as well. It does a tremendous amount of work with art, dance and various acting shows, and it has a significant number of football teams and other activities.

That club is a beacon, and I hope that the fact that the lord mayor has made it his specific charity will provide the foundation for its financial wherewithal for some time. I have been lobbying Westminster city council at a time of great constraint, and it has been able to provide a certain amount of money, but the club has effectively been losing money year on year and has had to dig into its reserves. On a positive note, it has an initiative with the private Westminster school, which is in the vicinity, and tries to gain income from allowing the school to use its facilities during the day. I suspect, for the reasons that I have set out, that the club is rather luckier than many such clubs throughout the capital and the country, which are under increasing financial constraint.

These issues are important, and I look forward to hearing the contributions from Front-Benchers. It is easy to be glib about this issue, but youth crime is important. It is not just an inner-city problem and it is not just a problem for young people, as it affects all of us in society. We have to get things right. There have been some positive developments. I speak largely from an inner-London perspective, but I hope that there is little dispute between all of us in politics on this issue. We understand the importance of this issue and that there is much work to do. The statistics might be moving in the right direction, but that is no cause for complacency.

In the latter part of 2007 and in the beginning of 2008 there seemed to be headlines in the national press, and certainly in the *Evening Standard*, every week about the death of yet another young person in London, but that is no longer the case. That may not mean that those incidents have stopped altogether—it is partly that the media bandwagon has moved on—but there have been improvements, which is one reason why it is less of a high-profile issue. However, there should be no complacency. I am pleased to have been able to say a few words, and I thank the hon. Lady for introducing the debate.

3.6 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on securing the debate. As she said, it follows on from yesterday's debate in the main Chamber, but also complements it, because it looks at slightly different aspects of the issue. The hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) has just made a thoughtful contribution that strongly reflected the tenor of yesterday's debate. As the hon. Member for

[Paul Holmes]

Regent's Park and Kensington, North said, yesterday's debate was very constructive and welcome. I made only a brief contribution, and I found it surprising that all three parties made almost exactly the same points in a constructive tone. We were well away from the rhetoric that we have usually had in the past 10 or 12 years about what to do about youth crime, being tough and locking people up. There was none of the rhetoric from outside this place about bringing back corporal punishment. Instead, there were many thoughtful contributions, both about the fact that, although the problem is serious, it is certainly exaggerated in the media and about how we should deal with the problem constructively, in ways that work, rather than in ways that simply look like tough knee-jerk responses to please the media and look good in headlines. So yesterday's debate was welcome, and today's debate has been of the same tenor.

We know that issues such as vandalism and drug abuse—mainly of alcohol rather than the traditional illegal drugs that we always hear about—foul language and knife crime are very serious and are undoubtedly major problems, but one welcome thing from both debates is that everyone who spoke in them reiterated the point that the vast majority of young people are not involved in those things. My constituents often make the point to me that most young people get tarred with the same brush, and there is a bad impression that they are all like that. I taught in secondary schools for 22 years, and I know that the vast majority of the thousands of children aged 11 to 18 whom I taught in that period, in three different schools in different parts of Derbyshire, were fantastic. All the stuff we read in press headlines bears no relationship whatever to the way in which most children behave and conduct their lives. Good news tends not to make it into the press, so we do not see that perspective from the press.

I am a parent of two children who are now adults aged 24 and 20, and one who is only 16 and is sitting one of her GCSE exams at this very moment. Parents meet children who come in with their sons and daughters, and I know from watching my children grow up and mixing with their friends that those kids are, almost without exception, fantastic.

Ms Buck: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) on their balanced and thoughtful contributions. However, does the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) agree that part of the issue, as I tried to suggest in my speech, is that great kids can sometimes offend? We have to recognise that, and find ways of ensuring that their lives are not destroyed if they sometimes step over the line as a result of youthfulness, temptation or peer pressure. We must find ways to support them and bring them back so that they can grow out of this behaviour and live a better life, without their actions becoming a scar on their lives in perpetuity.

Paul Holmes: Yes, absolutely. Almost my next point, as well as another later on, covers exactly that issue, but perhaps I can make a final point to finish this section of my speech.

I am a former teacher, and most of the kids I worked with over 22 years were fantastic. As a parent, I see my kids and their friends, and the kids I come across are, almost without exception, fantastic—they are not what we see in the newspaper headlines. As a politician—I was a borough councillor for 12 years and I have been an MP for eight years—all kinds of problems are brought to me. The vast majority of contacts with constituents that involve young people are about good things, but those are not the things that hit the headlines. When we are invited into schools, community centres and youth clubs, we see a terrific range of children involved in a terrific range of things, but that does not tend to hit the news in the same way. So it has been good, in our debates yesterday and today, to hear all the thoughtful comments emphasising the fact that we should not tar all children and teenagers with the same brush.

In her opening comments, the hon. Lady said that we criminalise behaviour today that we would not have criminalised in the distant past or, indeed, when I was a kid in the '60s and early '70s. Today, unlike in the past, certain behaviour will automatically be reported to the police and it will go down as a police crime statistic. There will be a criminal record and DNA will be taken, to hark back to our debates on DNA during consideration of the Policing and Crime Bill.

One example that always springs to mind involves a local history fair that I went to in the St. Helens ward in my constituency last year. We were looking at a photograph of some old stone cottages—now demolished—on Wharf lane next to the old canal basin. One old guy, who was 70-odd, told me that he lived there as a little boy. He said that back in the 1930s, they would tie a string to one door knocker, run it through all the others in the row of 10 cottages, stand at the end, pull the string, knock all the knockers and run around the corner or behind the hedge to watch all the 10 residents come to the door and start cursing. I knocked on doors and ran away as a kid in the '60s, and that old man and his friends did it in the 1930s, but the police would be called today, and if somebody was caught, there would be a criminal record. We have criminalised a lot of behaviour by young people in a way that is counter-productive.

People leave messages at their MPs' offices, saying, "The children are playing football in the street," but what did they do as children? I did not play football in the street, because I never really liked organised team games, but what did those people do when they were young? They played football and cricket in the street. On the one hand, people say in the press, "Children today don't play football and cricket in the street like they used to. That's why we don't win competitions around the world any more." In the next breath, they are on phone to the police, saying, "These kids are playing in the street. Come and move them."

One of our councillors said that people ring him up about children scrumping apples and that they phone the police. He said that when he grew up in a Nottinghamshire pit village, people scrumped applies, but no one would have dreamed of calling the police. Now, however, it would be a criminal offence. In another example, which I raised in Committee when we discussed DNA during consideration of the Policing and Crime Bill, two children built a tree house in a cherry tree, but they ended up being arrested, criminalised and having their DNA taken and put on the DNA database. That would have been unthinkable 20 years ago, let alone 40, 60 or 70 years ago. We need to consider carefully the fact that we are in danger of exaggerating these problems and criminalising young people.

Many people have a rose-tinted view of the past. They say, "We didn't have these problems in the past. We didn't have these crimes." I recently read an article about a charity home in Chesterfield, which a local philanthropist had donated so that unemployed people could gather, play cards and the rest of it. However, it had to be knocked down because it had been so badly vandalised—the lead had been ripped out and stolen, and the building had been smashed up. When did that happen? Not during the miners' strike in 1984 and not in 2009—in the wicked days that we live in—but in 1945, at the end of world war two, when we had standards and such things never happened.

Another example that I read about related to a wonderful Victorian park in Chesterfield, which has been done up in recent years with Heritage Lottery Fund money. After two or three attempts to make an aviary, the council had to abandon the idea and instead turned the building into a glasshouse with plants because local youths were going in and killing the birds. That was not in 2009; it was in the 1930s, when we had standards, such things never happened, children behaved and everybody could leave their doors opened because nothing ever got stolen.

So there is the rose-tinted view of the past and there is the over-criminalisation of a lot of behaviour. However, there is the other extreme, and we know all the crime statistics about knife crime and so forth. One thing that encapsulated that for me in a shocking way was the film "Kidulthood", which came out two or three years ago—"Adulthood" came out as a follow-up more recently. The film was based on the experiences of the person who wrote and directed it and who had grown up on a very tough inner-city estate in London. It was fictional, but it none the less gave an incredibly grim portrayal of stories like those that we regularly see in the newspapers today. So there is a serious problem, but let us not exaggerate it and let us remember what most children are like and what life is like in most areas.

How do we tackle the problems that undoubtedly exist? One of the traditional answers is that schools should teach standards, but I always find that very insulting as somebody who worked in schools for 22 years. I never worked in or visited a school where the teachers did not go out of their way to teach standards, manners and behaviour to the children—as if teachers would do anything else. However, we sometimes hear crass comments—occasionally from politicians, but more often in the press—suggesting that schools should teach standards. Of course schools try to do that, but the greater the problems and the deprivation in the area that a school represents, the more difficult that will be. I forget the precise numbers, but there are some famous figures showing that children spend far less time in school from five to 16 than they do at home with their parents or out playing with friends at weekends and in the evenings. School is only part of the mix. If we think that children are less respectful of authority and that they swear and answer back more when we tell them off, that is a problem for society as a whole. That is not something that teachers or we as politicians can solve by clicking our fingers or waving a magic wand; it is a much wider problem, which every parent has to tackle, rather than leaving it to somebody else.

We have heard about increasing constructive activity. I sometimes become a bit impatient when people say that there is nothing for kids to do. Kids today have more money, they are more affluent and they have more access to Xboxes, video games and the rest of it than I did when I was young in the '60s and '70s and certainly than children did back in the 1930s. If kids want to take part in activities, there are a lot available. As we have heard this afternoon, however, there is a danger that constructive guided activity will be one of the first things to be cut when there is a problem, as there is now with the recession and the tough financial situation that we face over the next few years.

We have heard examples of constructive activities from London, and there are other examples from Chesterfield. Traditional activities such as scouts, guides and youth football teams are flourishing. In fact, I was reading only this week that there is a waiting list of 30,000 people to join the scouts nationally, but they cannot get in, because there are not enough scout and guide leaders to run activities. There is a big demand for these activities and they are thriving—they are not withering away, as some people would have us believe.

There are also the things that councils can do. For more than 20 years, we have had a BMX track in one of the local parks in Chesterfield, although, of course, BMX goes in and out favour. In the past few years, the council has also opened a skateboard park and it will open another, much bigger one this autumn. The park was designed by local teenagers, although those teenagers are now adults, because it has taken so long to get the money together to get the park working. None the less, there are some fantastic facilities for young people.

One local police constable, who was an enthusiast for boxing, started some boxing clubs. That is not a sport that appeals to me, but it is popular, and it has spread across Chesterfield into other parts of north Derbyshire. It gets kids off the street and into organised, disciplined activity. I have also been to open martial arts centres that do exactly the same constructive activities with children. Another activity, called Gamezone, involves anything up to 10 or 15 volunteer parents, and I would mention Mick and Christine Samuels in particular. I have been to their youth club activities, which take place in some of the most deprived bits of Chesterfield and Staveley. As many as 90 or 100 children can be involved in indoor activities. Some activities involve computer games, but they also involve children socialising as they would at a youth club. Otherwise, those children would be on the streets.

A letter from the inspector who used to be in charge of Staveley police said that a couple of years ago, in the weeks in which Gamezone was operating, such as school holidays, the police could log on to their computer and look at the figures for referrals for vandalism, kids getting into people's gardens and kids drinking on the street corner. The figures just plummeted in the weeks in which Gamezone was operating, because instead of being out on the streets causing trouble, these youngsters, all of whom are under age, were involved in constructive activity and social engagement with other people, including adults.

One young lad came to me recently from an old pit village called Duckmanton just on the edge of Chesterfield—it is the last stop before the Bolsover constituency on the M1. He had been in trouble as a youngster—he is only about 19 now—and had got out of it by doing some motorbike racing, for which he was sponsored. He now wants to get a patch of land nearby,

[Paul Holmes]

just on the other side of the M1, at junction 29A, which some hon. Members may have heard of—it is going to be a big industrial park—and open it up for youngsters from the local area who get into trouble with the police for riding their motorbikes on the street. He wants to get them involved in constructive activity, learning to ride on that waste land, and learning to do the jumps and the rest of it. He has it all worked out: the business plan and the insurance that is needed. He has been to look at two similar schemes that exist in other areas. It is a fantastic scheme, if we can work with the council to provide the land and get such an activity going.

Everyone can come up with examples of such positive ways to provide constructive activity for young people, rather than just leaving them to it, to hang around the streets and inevitably start to get into trouble for quite low-key activities, which, 30 or 40 years ago, would not have got them a police record. However, as we have heard, there is the threat of cuts. If councils' budgets become tougher and tougher, what will be one of the first things to go? Back in the 1980s in Derbyshire, one of the first things to go was almost the entire youth service. It has slowly been rebuilt in the past 10 or 15 years, and now we all wonder what will happen in the next three or four years.

Another aspect of the matter is the importance—not for hard-hitting law enforcement, but for proactive prevention—of the visible police presence. The Government deserve congratulations, because there are more police officers and police community support officers around; there is a more visible uniformed presence. Last Hallowe'en, I went out on patrol with the specials in Chesterfield, and that night there were more of them than regular police on the street, because of the number of volunteers. I think they got 13 out on the night. Because there was a uniformed presence in such numbers, they could go to all the known trouble spots: the playgrounds, the high streets where young people hang around drinking outside shops, and the graveyards. They could be visible there all night and they were a deterrent. It was the quietest Hallowe'en for the past 10 or 15 years, because of the number of people on the street to act as a visible deterrent. The more people see a uniformed presence, the less there will be trouble that gets out of hand.

That takes us right back to the zero tolerance approach in New York, for example. When there is a deterrent to low levels of activity, serious levels do not arise in the first place. However, the presence on the streets is needed to achieve that. Derbyshire police are underfunded by £5 million a year and are being rate-capped by another £1.6 million for next year, and will have to cut 60 police officers as a result. How does that help, when Derbyshire police are already 380 uniformed staff down in comparison to equivalent counties? Obviously, it does not help.

On the question of alcohol, I mentioned earlier that the biggest problem in the context of drugs and young people is not illegal drugs but those that are legal, although it is illegal for people under 18 to get them. That is far and away the biggest problem. The effort that has traditionally been put into tackling alcohol issues is a fraction of what has gone on dealing with illegal drugs. Again, more constructive attention is now being paid to alcohol, and there are measures in the Policing and Crime Bill, which is going to the House of Lords, to permit further steps to be taken, although I think that an opportunity has been missed on such approaches as minimum pricing for alcohol. It is the super-strength cheap ciders and lagers that young people buy from the off-licence that are the real problem, not the beer that they buy in the pub in a managed, more adult environment.

Mr. Mark Field: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there are some deep-seated and long-standing issues about the use of alcohol, not just in British but, one might argue, in northern European society? However, there is some hope if one considers the sea change that has taken place in the past two decades in tobacco use. I accept that tobacco is a legal drug, and one that has tended to be used almost as a rite of passage at a particular age; but what has happened with tobacco must bring some hope that the policy changes that can be, and are being, made over a period of time will lead, much more importantly, to a sea change in general attitudes, which is the only realistic way in which we can ensure that the blight of alcohol—not just alcoholism but antisocial behaviour by young people—can be kept to a minimum.

Paul Holmes: It is one of those intangible problems, a bit like saying, "Children swear more on the streets, and answer back when you tell them not to do it, which they would never have done in my day." In so far as that is true, it is down to parents to change their attitude. The alcohol issue is another such intangible. The Government cannot click their fingers and solve the problems, and neither can schools or the police. Society must change its attitude, although Government can give nudges in the right direction. As the hon. Gentleman has said, smoking was prevalent, but the number of smokers is now down to 30 per cent. of the population. That is partly because of health education campaigns, cracking down on the sale of tobacco to under-age people and banning smoking in enclosed public places—which I was an enthusiast for, and which we were one of the last western countries to do.

All sorts of things have led to the sea change in attitude, and we need that to happen for alcohol. The idea that 24-hour licensing would mean a continental café culture, just like that, was nonsense. It is to do with society and how society sees things. That is where I took issue with the chief medical officer when he recommended that parents should never let their children drink any alcohol at home until they are over 15. As I have said before in debate, when my children were as young as five, they would have some watered-down wine when we were sitting eating a meal and drinking wine. By the time they reached their early teens alcohol was not a great, exiting, illicit thing, and they did not go out and get drunk, and collapse in the streets. That is how things are done in most of Europe and why there is a café culture there. Parents, with their children, treat alcohol with respect and as a family thing—not as a mysterious drug to rush out and get drunk on in the street at the age of 13, 14 or 15. Social attitudes are what need to be changed.

As for a targeted stop-and-search for knives, not much has been said today about the use of metal arches, but they are being used a bit more in the UK. The Select

Committee on Children, Schools and Families was recently in New York and we saw that every school automatically has police on duty in the entrance way, and a metal-detecting arch. It is not necessarily in use all the time, but it is there so that children going to school know it could be used, and they could be picked up carrying knives or, of course, in New York, guns. We are a million miles from that situation, but the judicious use of mobile metal arches on the underground, and of stop-and-search, has been very successful in the past year.

There are some startling comparisons to be made by considering a wide picture of the youth justice system: £300 million a year is spent locking young people up, and £30 million is spent on prevention. That is utterly the wrong way round, because, to go back to a point that the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North made several times, we should not be criminalising young people of 11, 13, 14 or 15 if we can avoid it. When they step out of line, we should try to avoid the automatic process of police, crime, arrest, custody and young offenders institutions. That balance, of £300 million on locking up 2,800 young people this year, as against £30 million on trying to prevent that happening, is the wrong way round.

The Youth Justice Board started to take responsibility for that aspect of the matter in 2000, and I know it would say that since then things are starting to move in the right direction and the numbers are going down. We are locking up fewer young people and putting more effort into prevention. If young people who are put in young offenders institutions come out with the same low level of education and drug or alcohol problems that they tend to go in with, and the same mental health problems they probably go in with—the same is true of the adult prison population—all that happens is that 70 per cent. reoffend within two years of leaving. What is the point of that? It may look tough; but countries such as Norway, Canada and the Netherlands do not take the macho, tough approach. Instead they do what works and concentrate on rehabilitation and help, and intensive fostering programmes—all things that the Government, to their credit, have started to introduce in the past year or two—and that is a far healthier way forward, which will bring the results we want in the long term. However, there is no magic wand. We cannot click our fingers or pass a law to solve the problems. It is a shame that the media give the impression that we can do so. The tenor of the debate, and of yesterday's debate, from all three parties, suggests that we are at long last moving in the right direction.

3.29 pm

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): This has been another constructive and positive debate on youth crime, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on securing it and on the way in which she approached it. We have heard about its effect on her constituents and the people in her community who have been touched by appalling incidents of violence, other examples of which we heard yesterday. There is a significant impact on our neighbourhoods, communities, friends and family and others whom we know, because of the effect on their perception of safety and security at home and work. That is why the issue is so important.

I agree with the hon. Lady: we should not frame these debates so that they are simply about knife crime. We need to look at the broader spectrum of youth crime and what that means. Someone does not necessarily automatically go from not being an offender one day to being a criminal or someone who has perhaps perpetrated one of the appalling incidents that gathers media coverage and is discussed in the debates that we have sadly had on far too many occasions over the past couple of years.

We need to look back at someone's history, their family, their neighbourhood and, indeed, the issues of inequality that the hon. Lady highlighted. That was reflected in an excellent report from the Select Committee on Home Affairs. We do not necessarily agree with everything in the report, but it has some good ideas and thoughts. Indeed, from the Government's comments yesterday, I know that they will be reflecting on the interesting analyses and themes that come out of that report, as we will be.

I want to pick up on a few things that the hon. Lady said, particularly the issues of schools, education and exclusion. I know that she and I have discussed those matters privately and have talked about how exclusion is often a big red flag in terms of quite serious offending thereafter. I have certainly been struck by some of the analyses, of which she will be aware from her membership of the Home Affairs Committee. For example, Operation Trident has offered profiles of some of the most serious offenders and it can almost be guaranteed that such offenders will have been excluded from school. That was quite a striking factor that came out of the evidence that was provided, and I am sure that it is reflected more generally.

In terms of the difference in the approach that we take, we believe that it is important for schools to have greater discretion to be able to exclude. That does not mean someone who has been excluded should be written off and that that is, in some way, where it all ends. Ofsted said that pupil referral units are the

"least successful of all in ensuring the good progress of pupils who attended them".

That is simply not acceptable and is why we would reform pupil referral units to ensure that they adopt the best practice of those units graded by Ofsted as outstanding and of special schools that cater for children with behavioural difficulties. We would also do a number of other things. This matter is so important. I strongly believe that pupil referral units should be made much better than they are at the moment.

Ms Buck: Of course, the standard of practice in pupil referral units may well vary and the worst need to be brought up to the standard of the best. However, the core truth, which I think is unarguable, is that if the most challenged and difficult children—in terms of offending behaviour or behavioural disorder—are concentrated together in one institution, almost nothing can be done to get the standard within that unit up to the standard of an average school because of the residualisation and concentration of pupils with a problem. That is why I disagree with the Conservative party's policy on exclusion.

James Brokenshire: I recognise that disagreement and respect the difference of view that we have on this. Our perspective is that we should ensure that schools are not

[James Brokenshire]

disrupted by pupils who are misbehaving, so that there are good standards in those schools and standards and expectations are raised. However, for those who have been excluded, we need to improve the pupil referral units by, for example, working with those parts of the voluntary and third sector that have experience of turning lives around. We need to ensure that pupil referral units provide a transition. It is not simply a case of sending someone to a PRU; the aim is to get that young person back into mainstream education. Turnaround services need to be piloted in specific areas through those exemplary third-sector organisations, so that schools have the option of either sending someone to a PRU or using a more intensive volunteer-led provider of education and training to ensure that those young people make progress.

I respect and recognise that there is a difference of perspective in terms of what the right way forward is and I am sure that we will continue to discuss and develop those views. I know that the hon. Lady holds genuine and strong opinions on this.

Ms Buck: I will do the hon. Gentleman a deal. If he can demonstrate to me that, say, 20 per cent. of the most successful schools in the country are willing to come to the table and accept a proportion of formally excluded pupils on their journey away from a pupil referral unit, I am prepared to accept that his policy might be the right one. In practice, the consequence of his policy is that even when a child has been through the PRU, the only schools that will usually accept them are those that are themselves the most challenged. That is why his policy will not work. However, if he can demonstrate that the more successful schools will take those pupils, I will rethink the matter.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that challenge because I certainly believe strongly that we need to ensure that young people who get into difficulty are not simply written off and that they are able to fulfil their potential, their ambitions and aspirations.

We should look back to what happened in a young person's life before they went to school. The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) made an interesting point in relation to his experience as a school teacher and the expectations that we have of schools. However, we need to look back even further to the early years and the family from which a young person has come, so that we get, for example, the necessary health interventions. We also need to ensure that health visitors are available for those first few days and months of life, so that we give young people the chance to make the most of their potential.

There is not some sort of silver bullet. Again, Trident did some good analysis on the issue. When I started to look into the subject, I noticed that it had produced a wonderful spidergraph of all the potential contributory factors that might lead to a young person offending. We should look at this matter in context. Yes, of course, I believe strongly that we should ensure that we have proper policing and robust enforcement—potential punishment is an essential strand in providing that safety and security—but we should also have targeted intervention and, more generally, primary prevention, so that we can ensure that we are giving young people and their families the strongest possible opportunity to move forward.

It is important to reflect on some of the good community work that is taking place. The hon. Lady referred to the work going on in her constituency, and some of those issues were also highlighted yesterday. For example, sport can be a powerful way in which to engage with young people. I recently visited Charlton Athletic football club to see some of its very good community work. We should not simply use sport as a diversion, but as a means of moving young people on and getting them into education. It can also be used to enable them to develop other skills, such as team and partnership skills, self-respect and self-confidence. We need to consider how we can use sport—whether football, boxing or other activities—not simply as a diversion, but as a means of ensuring that a young person is able to fulfil their potential. I was certainly struck by the work that Charlton Athletic football club and various other sporting and other groups are undertaking in terms of channelling that energy and enthusiasm positively. That is why it is important to stress that point.

Dealing with this issue is also about building a relationship with the police. The hon. Lady referred to young people's reluctance to report crime, and that theme came out in the Home Affairs Committee report. An interesting analysis was produced by 11 Million, an organisation led by the Children's Commissioner, on the confidence that young people have in the police and how their relationship with the police starts off positively and erodes over time. There is a change in the relationship between the police and young people so that the police go from being seen as an organisation that will protect and support young people to being an enforcer against them. We need to consider that carefully.

In some parts of the country, the fire service has been good at engaging with young people—for example, it is working with young people from challenged backgrounds through the local intervention fire education project. That gives young people self-confidence in a positive way. That is a good example of how one uniformed service has engaged with young people—although, of course, there are differences with the police.

The other interesting factor that came out of the Children's Commissioner's report was that young people tend to have a much more positive view of the police the more that they see them and have an interrelationship, a reaction or some sort of engagement with them. Again, that supports the model of visible policing, because it means a relationship can be built up when moving forward. I agree entirely with the hon. Lady about the importance of safer neighbourhood teams and the community policing model. That is something that I believe in very strongly. The safer neighbourhood teams and policing need greater emphasis and discretion.

Yes, we have been critical. There is some consensus on the matter, but we have been critical of the target-driven approach embodied in some of the previous plans for policing, which perhaps has not allowed officers discretion and has played into criminalisation, which is a theme that came through in contributions to this debate. Perhaps it is because of targets that the police feel that they have no discretion other than to go down the path of criminal charges. That is why we need to row back from rigid, target-driven approaches.

I appreciate that the Government are now saying that there is a change of approach, but the Minister will recognise that that is perhaps not universally accepted. For example, he will be aware of the comments at the weekend of the chief constable of Greater Manchester police, Peter Fahy, who stated:

"There is every indication the centre is struggling to overcome its addiction to central control through statistical approaches and one-off initiatives."

As I am sure the Minister would expect, we will be focusing clearly on the element of discretion, and whether the Government have, in fact, learned lessons about being rigid and top-down in their approach.

The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field) on some of the work that the Mayor of London is doing were interesting. Yes, this issue touches the whole of the country, and I would not want this to become a London-centric debate, but, as the Mayor highlighted in some of his briefings, sadly, most homicides occur in London. That may be why some of the debates have been framed around the capital city.

We are looking carefully at some of the Mayor's interventions on prevention, and also on enforcement. The Daedalus project uses a more intensive approach with someone who is going into a young offender institution for the first time. Resettlement is an important aspect of the project, which tries to reduce recidivism and stop the spiral of reoffending. We should reflect on and consider further some of the important and innovative ideas that are coming out of the Mayor's office.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the important work of local authorities. They have a key role in the prevention agenda—the prevention strand—because so much of this is about how local authorities' individual departments drive issues forward. That is why I am critical of some crime and disorder reduction partnerships. At present, too many of them are police-led rather than council-led. We need political buy-in: it is the driving force to get a partnership to work, and to get departments such as housing, children's services and social services to engage properly with the police and the primary care trust. Political ownership is essential to driving things forward, to putting the prevention strand very much at the forefront, and to working with the police and complementing their enforcement activity.

Yes, the police have to have an eye to that, but, ultimately, they are there as enforcers. It is perhaps a mistake to try to lump everything on to the police, to say that they should do enforcement and prevention. The prevent strand needs to be owned much more clearly and firmly by the local authority as well.

Obviously, on positive activities, there is a need to recognise that, sadly, we can have clubs and sports facilities, but, in some cases, too many young people are too scared to go and use them. This is about transporting a young person from where they live to the community facility that they might want to enjoy. The impact of postcode gangs and the feeling that they are going outside their territory are why, in essence, policing and the safety side have to be a key part of the overall strategy to ensure that diversionary activities can actually be enjoyed and used by young people who perhaps feel scared in their own communities.

The saddest aspect of this is the recognition that young people are most likely to be the victims of this kind of crime. The children's charity NCH noted that becoming a victim of crime, particularly a violent crime, is a real fear of children and young people growing up in the UK today. It is a sad reality, and we have to face up to the situation and the feeling young people have that they are not safe.

We need to look at enforcement, but we also need to focus on and place much greater emphasis on prevention. That is why my party would seek to strengthen families, and to provide young people with a much more stable environment in which to grow up. That is why we would encourage young people away from crime by helping them off welfare and into work—important points were made about that this afternoon. That is why we would introduce the national citizen service for all 16-year-olds who want a place to help them develop as individuals and to allow them to make their own contribution to society.

Breaking the spiral of offending before it becomes deep-rooted is essential to preventing young people from getting stuck in the criminal justice system, in persistent offending and on the conveyor belt to crime. We need to continue the positive discussions that we have had in recent weeks.

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) not only on securing the debate but on her thoughtful remarks.

Today's debate has been thoughtful and interesting. It follows yesterday's debate, which was consensual, so, for the sake of politics, let me break the consensus briefly and respond to the remarks of the hon. Member for Hornchurch (James Brokenshire) about partnership working, in particular around central direction. He argued that the Government need to learn the lesson about trying to direct from the centre—we are learning that lesson—but then sought to dictate that local authorities rather than the police should chair local partnerships. That is a matter for local partnerships. There are different models, and the decision depends on the locality. He also spoke about partnership and, with what I thought was a fairly old-fashioned view of policing, the role of the police. Of course the police are there to enforce the law, but they also play an important part in prevention. Certainly the police whom I speak to in and around partnership working accept that we have moved on.

But let me move back to consensus and the shared ambition of everyone who spoke this afternoon and recognises that youth crime, particularly violent crime, harms individuals and communities. We are determined—this is a feeling across the House—that we need to make young people and the communities in which they live safer. This debate comes against a backdrop of falling crime over the past decade or more, fewer young people offending for the first time and falls in reoffending. However, we must recognise that there is real concern about serious violent crime committed by young people, often against young people, and that perception, which is why this topic simply will not go away.

Let me make two points about the context. I strongly agree with what has been said about today's generation of young people. The vast majority just want to get on

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with their lives; indeed, they never get into trouble. I would go further and say that, far from being a problem in their communities, the ones whom I meet are often the ones who have volunteered in some way and are putting something back into their community. They are often the unsung heroes of their community.

Secondly, we should pay tribute to the voluntary organisations, churches, schools, police, other agencies and parents who work day in and day out to provide opportunities for and support to young people, and to nail the lie that Britain is broken. I do not want to get into the argument whether we should say "state" or "society". I prefer to use the word "community", which is at the heart of tackling many of the problems that we are discussing.

Let us be absolutely honest: a small minority of young people get into trouble and cause concern, and an even smaller minority get involved in serious violent crime. I thought that the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes) was in danger of going a little overboard in his description of young people, although I agree with the general thrust of what he said. Like him, I taught in secondary schools—in my case, for 17 years—before coming to this House. The question of who might go on to offend is complex. I taught for half the time in an affluent area and half the time in what might be described as a deprived area. I taught two people, one from each of those schools, who I know went on to commit murder. They represent a very small minority and are extreme cases, but we need to be careful about drawing generalisations from that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North has said, around 5 per cent. of young people commit 50 per cent. of youth crime, and we are determined to deal with that minority. We seek to do that with the tackling knives action programme and the youth crime action plan, which will send out a message that such behaviour will not be tolerated. That means tough enforcement and non-negotiable support, but crucially it also means a range of preventive measures, including developing parenting and family services. It also means putting services in place to tackle the misuse of drugs and alcohol, for example, which sometimes fuel the problem.

I welcome the recent report by the Home Affairs Committee, which has been the backdrop to our debate today. I acknowledge the important work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz) in producing a fair and, at times, hard-hitting report that recognises the effort and resources put into tackling knife crime, particularly through prevention.

We have committed £12 million to the tackling knives action programme between last June and March 2010. Responding to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North, we should recognise that problems evolve and change. Therefore, the focus has shifted in the second part of that programme, not away from knife crime, but to serious violent crime in a wider context. Signs of progress show that that programme is working, but I refuse adamantly to use the word "success" as long as young people are taking knives out on to the streets and injuring each other and, in some cases, killing each other.

I want to mention a number of measures that the Government are taking and a number of resources that we are expending, which I hope will address the themes that have been picked up in this debate. Operation Staysafe, for example, organised jointly by the police and children's services, took 124 young people off the streets into a place of safety over one weekend in February. Their parents and carers were grateful for their return and for the protection that was offered. However, that operation also challenges parents to accept responsibility for their children, some of whom are young, are out at night and are being put into vulnerable positions. It is important that parents should be held accountable, and, if necessary, they should be supported as well as challenged.

We are working with Be Safe to provide training to young people in workshops on the dangers of carrying weapons, which involves giving information to more than 1 million young people over the next five years. More than 95,000 young people attended the weapons awareness programme up to April last year. That point was recognised by the Home Affairs Committee in its important work.

Tackling youth violence also means recognising why some young people seek respect by carrying weapons. That point was picked up by the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Field). Through the youth sector development fund, managed by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Home Office launched a £500,000 scheme in TKAP areas, which involves supporting young people's efforts to remove themselves from gang culture as well as preventing others from being tempted to join. Our recent "It Doesn't Have to Happen" advertising campaign was developed by young people in terms of content and the medium used. As a middle-aged Minister in the Home Office in Whitehall, it is not necessarily for me to pick the message or the medium; it is up to people who understand better than me what message will work and what medium will get to the people whom we want to get to. That campaign also encourages parents, particularly mothers, to talk to their children about the dangers of carrying a knife.

The knife possession prevention programme targets under-18s who have been convicted of possession but not given a custodial sentence. Piloted in the original 10 TKAP areas, the programme dealt with more than its estimate of 230 young people last year, challenging their behaviour but supporting them to change it. Allied to the TKAP programme is the youth crime action plan, rolled out in 69 areas in England and two in Wales. It covers, for example, school police patrols, the family intervention programme and street teams to support young people on the front line.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North mentioned schools. We encourage safer school partnerships, which are effective in making young people feel safer, reducing antisocial behaviour and improving attendance at school. We want those partnerships to be the norm rather than the exception. I agree with the comments from all hon. Members about the importance of neighbourhood policing, which can play a role in this regard and which is central to this issue.

The Open initiative is providing positive activities for young people when they need them most on Friday and Saturday evenings. It is part of the £900 million Aiming

High programme. I understand the point about the squeeze on resources locally, because we face similar issues in government. Therefore, it is important that we take into account the points made in such debates before councils rush off to set their council tax at an arbitrary figure to capture a headline, although that will actually do nothing to support services in local communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North mentioned the Uncut project and its powerful documentary, which was recommended in the Committee's report. I want to put on the record our recognition of the importance of that work and that of other organisations that devote huge amounts of time and energy to tackling the causes of serious youth violence.

I am sure that Uncut is aware that young people are much more likely to be victims of crime than adults, yet they are less likely to report the crime or to seek support. They are in danger of retaliating and getting into trouble themselves or sometimes befriending the people who have offended against them, because they think that, somehow, that gives them security. We need to work with those victims, as we are doing now, to ensure that we do not escalate the problem. Over the past year, we have piloted support for victims in five pioneer areas, supporting those who need it and building confidence through shared experience and engaging in positive activities. Nearly 400 victims have been supported in this way and, over the next year, we want to roll that out to more areas.

We have worked hard to restrict access to weapons by young people. We have worked hard with retailers to limit shop and online sales. We are also doing some things that have not been mentioned today. First, we are working hard with the Design Alliance on important work, and 12 of the country's top designers are demonstrating how they can take a problem and design it out before it becomes a problem. Those designers are working on a set of knives for the kitchen—that is where many people access the weapon that they then take out—that can do the job in a kitchen but are virtually useless when it comes to stabbing somebody. Those knives will be piloted in the autumn.

Secondly, we are working on a new generation of e-commerce mobile phones that are being piloted but that will not be rolled out for a further two years. Let us see whether we can get ahead of the game and explain to the people bringing those phones into the marketplace that it is about more than just market forces. It is not just about the £30 on the phone that is in danger or about the phone's value; it is about the well-being of the young person who will be injured when that phone is taken from them, unless we can get some way of saying to perpetrators, "It's just not worth while going down that route," as they did previously with mobile phones.

Thirdly, when we brought young people together and asked them about where they feel safe in their schools and communities, it was remarkable, because they told us that the two things they want are CCTV and better lighting. When we said, "But CCTV means you'll be watched," they said, "We want to be watched, because we want to feel safe." Let us see if we can do that. It is not just about having more social housing, for example, but about better designing the estates on which those social houses are being built. That is crucial.

Stop-and-search has been mentioned. That is an important part of what the police do, but I accept that it has to be sensitively done. We are also making important improvements in collecting data from the NHS, particularly in TKAP areas, that are informing intelligence about knife crime and serious violent crime and allowing a more joined-up approach across partnerships to tackle a terrible problem.

My time is running out, but I want to say that we know that there is a great deal more that we have to do. However, I assure my hon. Friend and others that we are absolutely committed not just to reducing knife crime, but to reducing serious violent crime among young people. That requires enforcement and prevention. At the end of the day, it is about making young people safer in their communities.

RAF Allied Memorial (Plymouth Hoe)

4 pm

Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to have secured this debate so soon after the 65th anniversary commemorations of the D-day landings and so close to the start of armed forces and veterans week. I want to use this opportunity not only to raise awareness of Plymouth's RAF and Allied Air Force monument on the occasion of its 20th aniniversary, but to tell the story of how it came about, why it is in Plymouth and, most significantly, why it is so important that it exists.

The memorial is the only one, or perhaps the first one, in the country to acknowledge those who served in all commands of the Royal Air Force and Allied Air Forces during the second world war, including men and women from Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, former Rhodesia, South Africa, Belgium, former Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland. It also marks our particular gratitude to the United States of America for the major part that it played in the air war, particularly over Europe, and the substantial losses that it sustained with our other main ally, the USSR.

It is sobering to reflect that some 107,000 members of the Royal Air Force paid the ultimate sacrifice between 1939 and 1945, with 84,000 members of the United States air force and 42,000 of the Soviet air force. The tablet at the foot of the memorial makes specific reference to the command losses during the 1939-45 war, including Ferry Command, West Africa Command, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Balloon Command, Army Co-operation Command, Maintenance Command, Transport Command, 2nd Tactical Air Force, Flying Training Command, South East Asia Command and Technical Training Command, as well as Fighter Command, Coastal Command, Middle East Command and, of course, Bomber Command.

The memorial stands atop Plymouth Hoe, our wonderful historic waterfront, which my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck)—who I am glad to see here today—has likened to Sydney harbour. People who are not from Plymouth may find that comparison difficult to imagine, but for Plymouthians the Hoe is a special place. It is the focus for many of our most important events, as it will be for our marking of national armed forces and veterans week.

With its naval heritage, Plymouth may seem an unlikely choice for a memorial to commemorate air forces, but our city's connection with the armed forces is as varied as it is deep. Plymouth Hoe overlooks the site of what was RAF Mountbatten, home of the Sunderland flying boats and Catalinas, and the air station to which a certain Aircraftman Shaw, who is better known as Lawrence of Arabia, fled to escape publicity in the 1930s.

Like so many military and industrial cities, Plymouth experienced the full brutality of air power with a blitz lasting from July 1940 to April 1944, which claimed the lives of almost 1,200 civilians. It also changed the fabric of our city. Gone were our Elizabethan houses, our grand civic buildings and more than 3,000 homes. When Plymouth's principal place of worship, St. Andrews church, was severely damaged, a local headmistress placed the word "Resurgam"—I shall rise again—above the door, and Plymouth did indeed rise again.

I am proud to say that that strength and resolve lives on. It was apparent a few weeks ago when seemingly the whole city turned out to cheer home 3 Commando Brigade, Royal Marines and 29 Commando, Royal Artillery from their difficult but vital work in Afghanistan. It can be seen in the way our higher and further education institutions have united with our businesses and employers not just to work our way out of recession, but to keep on track with our ambitious growth plans which, with the Mackay vision for our built environment, will carry on the work of the civic leaders who set about rebuilding the city 60 years ago.

It was the same dogged determination that made the memorial possible in the first place, and the story of how the RAF and Allied Air Forces monument came about is remarkable. It started with a single individual, who saw something wrong and set about correcting it. It reached its goal with a crowd of 20,000, ambassadors from 15 countries, a flypast and, most importantly, a lasting tribute to those who gave their today for our tomorrow. It also seeks to mark the contribution of those who survived, and those who continue to serve the country in different but equally dangerous circumstances.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Devonport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the international monument. She has touched on the vision of a few key individuals being vital to the project taking off, but does she agree that it was supported by the generosity of Plymouthians? In his book, a copy of which my hon. Friend has beside her, Jim Davis says that many small donations were received with letters stating that the donors were glad that the monument was being built because a father, son or other relative had been killed. The monument would not exist without those people. The same applies to the monument at which I attended a ceremony last week to celebrate American naval personnel who were stationed in Plymouth, and served and died. We should honour them also.

Linda Gilroy: We should indeed. My hon. Friend is right; the idea was first conceived by Jim Davis, and he would be the first to acknowledge that it took those many small contributions and some big ones.

As a young man, Jim lived through the Plymouth blitz. His experience of the "traumatic nights of fear" with the "dreaded sounds of sirens", the falling ceiling plaster, the glowing orange silhouette of Plymouth burning during the night, and the piles of rubble in the morning made Jim vow to join Bomber Command, and he ultimately served as a rear gunner on Lancaster bombers. He flew some 33 missions, and in his telling book "Winged Victory" he says that lady luck seemed to be beside him on all those occasions, sometimes in extraordinary ways. He tells many stories of those who were, like him, fortunate, and of many of those who inevitably, given the casualty figures, were not.

Jim later settled back in Plymouth, and was dismayed that in the years following 1945 no memorial was built to honour the RAF, Commonwealth and Allied Air Forces. He later wrote:

"I felt, in a democratic country, this mistake on the part of my country should be rectified. I decided to take the responsibility upon myself."

That was typical of his resolve, but it was no easy path. He started by writing to local councillors and air force associations, but was disappointed with their initial response. They simply did not believe that it could happen because the cost was too high, the public interest insufficient, and the political will absent. However, Jim was not going to let that set him back. Over time, he met every councillor he had written to, and persuaded each of them in turn to support the project.

Perhaps the most important development in the early days of the campaign was the decision in 1984 to ask for the help of Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett who, as the youngest air marshal in the RAF, led the Pathfinders during the second world war. Given the international dimension of the memorial, there could not have been a more appropriate choice. He was born in Australia, and during the early part of the war he was responsible for arranging the delivery to Britain of hundreds of aircraft manufactured in Canada and the United States. A key part of persuading the council to allow the monument to be erected on the Hoe was his address during a visit to Plymouth.

It is worth taking time to reflect on the key role that Bennett's Pathfinders played in enabling D-day and the liberation of mainland Europe to happen. Only a few hours before the troops were due to land on the D-day that we have been commemorating, Bennett's Pathfinders attacked the 10 heavy gun emplacements along the Normandy beaches and, with the main force of Bomber Command, destroyed them all. One hates to think what might have happened on D-day if those emplacements had not been taken out.

Jim Davis said of Bennett's role more generally:

"Extraordinarily as it may seem, in 1942 Britain had no other man who could have done the job that Bennett did in forming the Pathfinder Force, training them to such excellence and doing the air routing for Bomber Command throughout the war".

His name also has resonance in this place. He served for 73 days as Member of Parliament for Middlesbrough, West in 1945. Bennett's stature and charisma and Davis's drive and resilience made a winning combination. Unfortunately, Air Vice-Marshal Bennett unexpectedly passed away in 1986 before the project had come anywhere near fruition. That was a huge setback, but he continued to be an inspiration to Jim Davis. Indeed, Air Vice-Marshal Bennett's ashes are interred beneath the memorial.

A committee of air marshals from all the wartime commands had been assembled, but without the leadership of Air Vice-Marshal Bennett, it came to think that the obstacles were insurmountable and that the project could not be achieved. With a customary display of fortitude, Jim did not let that stop him. He formed a committee of local supporters to continue the project. He did not care that they were not as distinguished or high powered; the only thing that mattered was that they had the will to make it happen.

One of the committee members is the secretary of the monument committee, my constituent Mr. Douglas Taylor. He trained as an Air Force electrician and was inspired by Jim when they met at a static air display at Plymouth airport. With the help of the committee, Mr. Taylor has taken on the significant organisation behind the monument service each year. Jim says that

"if it had not been for Doug Taylor, our secretary, the monument would never have been built on Plymouth Hoe."

The original monument committee included Cliff Platt, Lauri Scott, Bill Flynn, Dennis Teague, Doug Dawson and Ray McSweeny, who are all ex-RAF personnel. That stalwart team was joined 12 years ago by Squadron Leader Francis Reis of volunteer reserve training, who is now chair of the monument committee. Mentioning his role reminds me of the strong links between the six squadrons of air cadets in the city, which are about 300 in strength, and the support that they give every year in organising that event.

The project slowly gathered pace. A letter-writing campaign collected supporters and donations. Important links were made with key foreign embassies. Plans were put in place for the unveiling ceremony. The United States pledged servicemen for a guard and aircraft for a flypast, and Holland was sending warships. The Russian embassy met with Jim and gave its support. The representatives of 17 allied countries pledged that they would attend.

The momentum was then sufficient to get through the significant opposition from the military establishment in Whitehall. By refusing to support the project from the outset, the establishment believed that it would be stopped in its tracks. However, it had not counted on the determination of Jim Davis and his supporters. Whether it approved or not was irrelevant: the event was going ahead.

The date was set, but the costs escalated suddenly. Jim and his team redoubled their efforts to make it happen. Tarmac donated the granite for the plinth, English China Clay provided the lorries and cranes and ARC the cement. The 3 ft gunmetal eagle insignia was crafted in Devonport dockyard. As my hon. Friend said, numerous individual donations were received from members of the public. The family of Air Vice-Marshal Bennett have played a key role and given important support, not only at that time but over the 20 years since the monument was built.

The memorial was inaugurated on the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the second world war, Sunday 3 September 1989. Over 300 guests were invited from 15 countries, including an admiral and an air marshal from the USSR. The unveiling was undertaken by Air Marshal Sir John Curtis, who drew on his experiences in Coastal Command and as commander of the RAF in the Falklands war, which was still fresh in many memories. His speech drew a comparison between the defeat of the armada 350 years before and the defeat of the Luftwaffe by "the few".

The crowning glory of the memorial is a 6 ft high bronze statue of a gunner who has since been named the unknown airman by locals. I am sure I am not the only person who has gazed up at that figure, with the blue sky behind him, and recalled John Magee's immortal poem "High Flight", which each year forms part of the ceremony. I have attended most of the ceremonies over the past 15 years and pay tribute to the voluntary effort that has kept up the significant logistics required to deliver what is a moving service. Many of the embassies that attended the unveiling ceremony 20 years ago still send representatives. It is a ceremony with very human dimensions. At the end of the formalities, families and

[Linda Gilroy]

children add single carnations to the wreaths laid by representatives of the allied nations and the air force associations.

With the staggering losses in the 1939-45 war and in subsequent conflicts and the way in which the monument marks all who have given and continue to give service to the allied air forces, the monument sadly has a very personal meaning for many families. Many names of those who lost their lives were included on a scroll that was buried alongside the ashes of Pathfinder Bennett.

It was agreed several years ago that the monument service could be held each year on the last Sunday of June, which by happy coincidence was the same weekend as veterans weekend last year and armed forces day this year. That means that the combined force of the committees that support those events and the Lord Mayor's office, which has had an important role since the monument was built, have come alongside the efforts of the monument committee.

I will read the words of Air Vice-Marshal Bennett that are read out each year at the ceremony, which he wrote as an active member of the United Nations Association:

"In time of war, men strive and men die for the protection of their country and their loved ones, and for the ideals in which they believe. No sacrifice is too great and no ordeal too bitter to deter the tide of human effort towards victory.

Indeed, in the agony and squalor of war, man reaches his true greatness—but it is only when peace comes that there exist the conditions in which the ideals for which we fought can be achieved.

I have seen two great wars in my lifetime and after each I have seen the political leaders of almost every country in the world fritter away the opportunities which their warriors have created for them. After each war, I have seen the return of pessimism and of distrust—and the vitiation of human relations by intrigue, fear, greed and dishonesty.

Moral standards in matters great and small have sunk appallingly. In short, man in peace has proved unworthy of the dead of two world wars.

This need not be. We are the same men and women who fought beside those who died. We are made of the same stuff which achieved greatness in time of war. Therefore in peace, let us pray and think—and act as aggressively and courageously as we did in war, so that we may achieve freedom, fair play, decency and integrity internationally, nationally and personally—which the sacrifices of two world wars so nobly earned."

There are many opportunities in the civic life of Plymouth to reflect on matters such as the sacrifice of the thousands of allied airmen, thanks in large part to this magnificent monument and the tireless efforts of those who turned a vision into the reality it is today. I hope that the Minister will recognise the work of Jim Davis, and the people he worked with and inspired to be part of this.

To conclude, I pay tribute to the successive councils and lord mayors of Plymouth for supporting the work of this international monument. I am sure the Ministry of Defence will maintain its commitment to the attendance of senior representatives at the annual ceremonies. As one of the committee members put it:

"We would like to think that we are established in the corporate mind of the MOD".

The MOD's recognition study last year created a major step change in the way in which we value the work of our armed services, their families and those who support them in so many ways. Armed forces day is an important part of that. In recognising the important work of the monument committee, I hope that the Minister will consider what role the MOD can play in helping the monument to gain the broader recognition that its thousands of supporters believe it deserves.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Kevan Jones): It is a pleasure to appear under your chairmanship, Miss Begg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Linda Gilroy) on securing this debate to highlight something of which she and the people of Plymouth are very proud. I also commend her commitment to the armed forces in general. I was privileged to serve with her on the Defence Committee and know that she takes a keen interest in such matters. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Alison Seabeck). No two people advocate on behalf of their city as strongly as my hon. Friends.

This debate recognises the work that was undertaken on the memorial. I had the privilege of receiving an extract from Jim Davis's book from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton. I read it last night with great interest. It shows that the determination of the individuals involved ensured that they were not defeated in creating the memorial. It also says something about the people of Plymouth. They are certainly supporting our armed forces today. Indeed, my hon. Friend referred to the welcome home parade, and I thank the people of Plymouth for that.

When one reads the history of the war, one realises that Plymouth lost about 1,200 people and suffered 4,000 casualties during the blitz, and that parts of a beautiful city were destroyed. However, it shows the tenacity with which the people fought back that they not only rebuilt the city that Plymouth is today, but ensured that the monument was built. My hon. Friend referred to the part that Plymouth plays in our D-day celebrations. I was privileged at the weekend to be in Normandy, and saw the support given by the city of Plymouth, not only with the Pathfinders but throughout the second world war. We should recognise that.

May I make another important point, one that I know my hon. Friend is conscious of, which is the importance of passing on the message that future generations should remember the sacrifices of the past? The memorial in Plymouth is a good way of achieving that. I know that my hon. Friend is keen to ensure that future generations do not forget the debt of gratitude and honour that we owe those individuals.

Having read Jim Davis's book, I would like to pay tribute to him. I pay tribute, too, to the late Air Vice-Marshal Don Bennett and to the present members of the committee. They want to ensure not only that the monument is maintained but that the service takes place annually. May I say a big thank you to Doug Taylor and everyone else involved? The memorial is unique, as my hon. Friend said. It recognises the sacrifice made by more than 100,000 RAF personnel between 1939 and 1945, and by more than 80,000 Americans and 40,000 Soviet personnel. It also recognises the other Commonwealth air forces that made the defeat of fascism achievable.

The monument was erected and is being maintained through the efforts of individuals. I am sorry that I could not take up my hon. Friend's kind invitation to attend this year's event, but I will visit Plymouth shortly and I will be sure to include a visit to the memorial in the itinerary.

Linda Gilroy: Although we could not get the Minister to come to the monument this year, I have managed to get the monument to come to the Minister: it would be greatly welcomed if he could spare the time to meet the monument committee.

Mr. Jones: As I learned when serving with my hon. Friend on the Defence Committee, she uses various methods to get her way. I look forward to my visit to Plymouth. I have visited the city on a number of occasions with my hon. Friend and the Defence Committee, and I know of its contributions not only in support of our armed forces in general but also locally. This year, the RAF will be represented by Air Vice-Marshal Lindsay Irvine at the annual thanksgiving commemoration and the wreath-laying ceremony on 28 June. That shows the Department's commitment to ensuring that high recognition is given to the monument and to the event.

My hon. Friend referred to armed forces day; the first falls this year, on 27 June, and it builds upon and incorporates veterans day. Across the country, some 80 events will be taking place that have been directly funded by the MOD. Again, I pay tribute to the tenacity of the hon. Lady in securing a contribution of £10,000 from the MOD for the event in Plymouth. Veterans day was a success. The recognition study, supported by veterans organisations, ensured that we could widen it to incorporate serving people, and it is now called armed forces day. This year's is the first such day, and I want to build on that. There is growing interest in, and growing support for, recognising the debt of honour that we owe not only to our veterans but to the men and women serving in the armed forces. They come from communities large and small across the country, including Plymouth. It will be an annual event, and I hope that it will get into the nation's psyche, ensuring that on at least one day a year, people can say thank you to the men and women of our armed forces.

Today's debate is being held not only in recognition of the tremendous work involved in securing the memorial but to ensure that we continue to support it and perhaps gain more recognition for that work. During my tenure in this post, I will try to ensure that the MOD is involved in the annual event. I want to discuss with my hon. Friend how we can promote the memorial, possibly through publications or the MOD website. The events in Normandy last weekend showed that there is an increasing interest not only in memorials but in some of the great stories behind the individuals who took part in the nation's defence during the second world war. As Veterans Minister, I believe that it is important to transmit those stories to future generations. We must ensure that people know of them.

Linda Gilroy: Before the Minister concludes, may I say how pleased I am that he was able to read the chapter about the memorial that I gave him? I mention again the book written by Jim Davis, and especially the front cover, because he was quite an artist. He won a scholarship to Plymouth college of art and design and he is a well-known local artist. I commend the book to the Minister—I may buy him a copy so that he can read the rest of it—because it contains some simply remarkable stories, not only about Plymouth but about Jim's time in Bomber Command.

Mr. Jones: I look forward to receiving a copy. It is important that people's memories are not forgotten. When I meet veterans and veterans organisations, I try to encourage people to put the information in writing or on tape; it is important that it is kept. Again, can I say no to my hon. Friend? No, I cannot.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I look forward to my visit to Plymouth. Again, I thank her and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport for their support of the armed forces and for ensuring that veterans matters remain at the top of the Government's agenda.

4.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

United Nations

4.30 pm

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Miss Begg, and I am grateful to Mr. Speaker for selecting this debate. I also welcome the Minister to his place—I think that this is his first debate with his new responsibilities. I am glad that he is here, and I am glad that I am here, too. Since my meeting in the House, I have been back to my constituency and returned again. It was a pretty tight call, but it is important to be here for this debate.

My request for this debate was prompted by the recent events in Sri Lanka. I make no bones about the fact that that will be the main theme of my comments, because it tested the effectiveness of the United Nations, which, put bluntly, was found wanting.

I welcome my friend the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), who, with me, has been interested in this subject since we entered the House 25 years ago. Like me and many other colleagues in this House, he is frustrated that, in recent weeks, when the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and around the world, including here, looked to Governments outside Sri Lanka and international organisations, such as the EU, the Commonwealth and the UN, to help it in its hour of need, such help was not forthcoming to the desired extent.

I am aware that there is a general debate about reform of the UN. My party, and others, have long argued that the structure set up in 1945—over the road from here, where the first General Assembly took place—which was understandable at the time, and which gave five countries particular responsibilities and control, is no longer appropriate for the modern age. As we all know, the five countries that had that privilege, and continue to enjoy it, are the United States, the Soviet Union—now its successor, Russia—China, France and the UK. They are permanent members of the Security Council and have the right of veto, which means that they determine decisions. Over the years, that veto has often been used by Britain, the States and the other three members. Then, of course, there are the other members who rotate with the presidency.

Since the beginning of the year, a huge effort has been made to persuade the UN to take international action to avoid a continued and unabated military offensive by the Sri Lankan Government against the Tamil Tiger rebel army, which was conducted in such a way that civilians were injured and many innocent people were killed. The blunt truth about the past few months is that many civilians were injured and killed. We still do not know how many, but we know that, at the beginning of April, the UN estimate—from its own papers—was between 6,000 and 7,000 killed since the end of January this year and about 14,500 injured. In April and May, until the conflict ended with the victory of the Sri Lankan army, many more were killed and injured.

Those who went anywhere near the fighting in the Jaffna peninsula, Vanni and Vavuniya, and along the north-eastern seaboard, said—I paraphrase—that it was the most terrible thing that they had ever seen. Among others, we have heard descriptions of the devastation from the International Committee of the Red Cross, which remained there until the end, from John Holmes, who is one of the most senior UN officials, and from Ban Ki-moon, who visited after the conflict ended and flew over the northern territory. Like others, I have just come from a meeting in the House at which the journalist, Catherine Philip of *The Times*, who visited the region after the event, with the UN party, said that it was one of the greatest scenes of devastation that she had ever seen. Photographs were shared with us.

The problem was not that the UN was not asked to help, and it was not that it was not trying to help. Colleagues in this country, including Foreign Office Ministers, were assiduous in their attempts to put pressure on the UN. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister and, in particular, the Foreign Secretary for their efforts. The latter visited the States, where he engaged with the Secretary of State. I also pay tribute to the American Administration, who made clear the need to engage with the UN on the need to take positive measures. Three young British Tamils and I had the privilege of visiting the State Department, the White House and the British embassy in Washington. We left convinced of the Administration's commitment. We also held a teleconference in this building with two senior UN civil servants, and we were convinced of their desperate desire to intervene. They were waiting with medical and humanitarian aid and food and water. Ships were waiting with tons of equipment, but they could not enter, because the Sri Lankan army would not agree to it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and on the way in which he is making his case. Does he agree with me about the problems facing the UN? Responsible and high-ranking UN officials drew attention to the fighting, the civilian deaths and the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and there is a requirement, under international law, to provide assistance. However, due to the arcane structure of the Security Council and the Human Rights Council, the UN was unable to act, despite the fact that events in Sri Lanka contravened both the universal declaration of human rights and the UN charter itself.

Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Like me, he has taken a long interest in international affairs and the interests of minority communities in many countries around the world. He knows that one of the institutional problems is that the UN Security Council is, by its constitution, intended to take action only in the face of a threat to international peace and security. The Sri Lankan Government argued to the Chinese and Russians that this was not an international matter and that it did not threaten international peace and security. I contrast that with the situation in Iraq some years ago when, owing to the threat—perceived or real—from weapons inside Iraq to other countries, it was argued that there was a threat to international peace and security. Arguably, the UN's actions are much more limited, if something can be described as internal.

In recent years, the international community has sought to address that issue. It has moved from saying, "We can act only in the face of a threat to international peace and security," to deciding, only as recently as the past decade, that there is a responsibility to protect, which is an entitlement. Significant work has been done—I pay tribute to the UK and others—to invoke and establish that responsibility to protect. That

responsibility is important, because we have seen how no intervention was forthcoming when places such as the Balkans, Darfur, Rwanda and Burundi descended into genocide.

Arguably, if we accept the right to intervene and protect, we need the mechanism to do so. My colleague, Lord Ashdown, has argued that it is no good unless troops are available, willing and able to enter under such circumstances. However, I argue that in this case there was undoubtedly an international right to protect. Sufficient independent evidence, including from the UN and certainly from American satellites, pointed to attacks on civilian communities in such significant numbers to lead only to the conclusion that those affected were unnecessary and intentional victims of the Sri Lankan Government's actions.

The first question is whether there is something wrong with the UN, when the same criteria are required both for intervention and for threats to international peace and security. Both require a vote by the Security Council, and there can be a veto by any one of the permanent members. The same blocking mechanism applies in both cases. If Russia or China, or anyone else with the right of veto, wants to block an initiative, then the right to protect and intervene for humanitarian purposes cannot be acted on.

Does the Minister accept that that is a flaw in the present system and that we need urgently to restructure the organisation of the UN and the power mechanisms within the Security Council, so that we do not have a single country, or combination of countries, blocking that second right to intervene for the protection of communities? If we wait for unanimity or for vetoes to be lifted, it will be too late.

My second concern about the working of the UN is, I am afraid, demonstrated by what happened a couple of weeks ago in Geneva at the UN Human Rights Council—the Human Rights Commission was thought to be inadequate, so the UN created the Human Rights Council, which is unarguably a better mechanism than its predecessor. The Human Rights Council, which was convened by a significant number of countries, including ours, was requested to consider whether there was a case for investigating war crimes—by the Government of Sri Lanka or by the Tamil Tigers—and the question of genocide. In the end, the request did not succeed. Despite a plea by Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a coalition was built up by Sri Lanka, which effectively turned that request into almost a paean of praise for the Sri Lankan Government.

The countries at the meeting included Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Italy, Mauritius, Mexico, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Slovakia, South Korea, Switzerland, Ukraine, Uruguay and the United Kingdom. In particular, Argentina, Chile, the Czech Republic, Mauritius, Mexico and Switzerland wanted a stronger resolution, but in the end they were blocked by action on the other side by Brazil, Cuba, India, Pakistan, Bolivia and South Africa. Bluntly, countries such as South Africa should know better than to intervene to prevent that sort of investigation. It was unsatisfactory that the Secretary-General did not throw his weight behind the Human Rights Commissioner at the Geneva convention. Having got that item on the agenda, it was the obvious place to do the first follow-up to the conclusion of proceedings.

I am keen for the Minister to have a full opportunity to say something, and the hon. Member for Islington, North may want to say a word as well. I conclude with the very simple proposition that the UN is not up to the job in those sorts of cases. I want to know that the Minister accepts the case for reform both of the Security Council and of the Human Rights Council. Moreover, I want to hear what the Government intend to do with the unreconstructed UN to get justice and rights for Tamil communities and others affected in Sri Lanka.

As of today, there are many people in camps in Sri Lanka, and some of our colleagues have been to see them. Many people are separated from their families; many people are missing and presumed dead; and many people have been taken away and are experiencing the most severe detention. There is still no access for journalists or the UN. Moreover, international humanitarian agencies do not have full access to everywhere they want to go. There is something wrong with our international structures when our only international body, on which all the countries of the world are represented, is unable to intervene in such circumstances before the event, during the event or even after the event.

As an internationalist and a supporter of effective international action, my plea to the Government is to energise themselves to reform the structures so that never again do people have to sit by while minorities are killed and wounded by their own Government, when the rest of the world should be intervening.

4.45 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I shall be brief so that the Minister has sufficient time to reply to the debate. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing this debate.

The situation in Sri Lanka is obviously terrible. We must reflect on how the UN has reacted in that respect. I am not here to be critical of the British Government. Indeed I have had meetings with the Foreign Secretary, and the matter has been raised countless times in the House by a large number of Members who have been extensively and effectively lobbied by their concerned constituents. I thank the Foreign Secretary for going to the Security Council and to Sri Lanka and for doing his best to bring about a ceasefire and some kind of humanitarian resolution to this crisis. Therefore, my point is not to be critical of the British Government.

Serious issues, however, must be addressed. First, as I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey, in terms of the UN charter and the universal declaration of human rights, it is quite clear that there are serious deficiencies in what is happening in Sri Lanka. After making a statement, visiting Sri Lanka and calling for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid, it is unfortunate, to put it mildly, that the Secretary-General should be ignored by the majority of the Security Council, and because of the veto system, that is essentially the end of that.

My second point concerns the Human Rights Council. I have attended meetings of the Human Rights Commission in the past and the Human Rights Council on behalf of the non-governmental organisation Liberation. I found the Commission to be quite cumbersome, but it did give quite a lot of space and working areas to a number of

[Jeremy Corbyn]

other organisations and NGO groups. I was concerned that with the establishment of the Human Rights Council, the NGOs would be driven out of the frame. I was assured by Louise Arbour and others that that was not the intention. I do not believe that it ever was her intention, or the intention of those who set it up. None the less, the voice of civil society has effectively been diminished and diminished in the Human Rights Council. If someone is in a country in which there is a serious attack on the human rights and liberties of individuals, they need to have a civil society voice that can bypass their Government and go to the United Nations. If that voice is choked off, the UN is less effective. It is quite clear in the founding principles of the UN and all its agencies that there is a civil society component in what the United Nations does. I am interested in hearing the thinking of the Minister on that and on enhancing the role of civil society organisations at the Human Rights Council.

As for the current situation in Sri Lanka, there are at least 250,000 people in what the Sri Lankan Government euphemistically refer to as refugee camps, but which, in reality, are prisons. People are not free to come and go. Disturbing reports talk about the treatment of individuals in those places and about the lack of visits. It is very clear that there is no access by independent observers or by the media. The well-grounded suspicion is that when those camps are finally closed the inmates may not be allowed to return home. No guarantees have been given. They may well be sent to another place. A humanitarian aid ship off the coast of Sri Lanka has been denied access to Sri Lanka to bring in its voluntarily collected aid.

We applaud and thank the Department for International Development for the very large amount of aid that it has provided through NGOs to try to help people through this humanitarian crisis, but there must be transparency. Sri Lanka is a member of the United Nations, a member of all the appropriate UN agencies and a signatory to all the appropriate international declarations. It must abide by them and allow these poor people, who were bombed in the war and now, unfortunately, are suffering and starving in the camps, to get the aid that the rest of the world wants to get to them. It is not right that a coalition at the Human Rights Council and the Security Council can effectively override the very decent humanitarian instincts of many senior UN officials who want to help people and do their jobs properly.

4.50 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing the debate. He has a long track record of raising concerns about what is happening in Sri Lanka. The same can be said of my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn), who mentioned the work that DFID is doing on humanitarian assistance. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for International Development, who represents Harrow, West, is with us. He not only has many Tamil constituents but, on a long-term basis, has had overall responsibility in DFID for overseeing the money that we give to the Red Cross and for matters relating to the functioning of the UN regarding the humanitarian assistance that is being provided now, and has been in the past, to those most affected in Sri Lanka. I know, because I am a former colleague of his in that Department, that he does an excellent job in ensuring that humanitarian assistance is made available in what are very difficult circumstances.

From my previous role in DFID, I learned how important the UN is to the UK. It remains at the heart of our multilateral architecture. However, it needs to change if we are to be able to respond properly to the new challenges of the 21st century. Reform is easier said than done, but building the capacity of the UN and the wider international community to prevent and resolve conflict is at the heart of the work of my new Department, the Foreign Office.

At the pinnacle of the UN system to face threats to international peace and security is, of course, the Security Council. As hon. Members have graciously said, the UK has been leading the action at the UN in terms of our response to the Sri Lankan crisis. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear when he visited the UN on 11 May, we believe that the civilian crisis in Sri Lanka merits the attention and focus of the UN at all levels, including formal discussions by the Security Council. Security Council members made their concerns about the situation clear in the statement of 13 May.

I welcome the continued engagement of the UN and regular informal briefings given by senior UN officials, including a briefing to Security Council members by the Secretary-General on 5 June. Those actions at the UN have been important, because they have maintained the spotlight of international concern on the Government of Sri Lanka. We welcomed the visit of the UN Secretary-General to Sri Lanka last month. We urged the Government of that country to use the opportunity provided by that visit, as well as those by the Secretary-General's chief of staff, Vijay Nambiar, and Sir John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, to recognise that the UN has a pivotal role to play—as the hon. Gentleman made clear—both in the delivery of humanitarian aid and in encouraging the process of political reconciliation that must be an integral part of rebuilding Sri Lanka's civil society.

We also welcome the joint statement between the Secretary-General and the Government of Sri Lanka, which underlines the importance of an accountability process for addressing violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. The Government of Sri Lanka have agreed to take measures in response to those grievances. We want to work with the Government of Sri Lanka and the international community to help to alleviate the dreadful situation in Sri Lanka.

The hon. Gentleman, who secured this Adjournment debate, should be aware of the views of some members that the Security Council is not the appropriate UN forum for discussion of the situation in Sri Lanka. As the Foreign Secretary made clear, a failed resolution—one that faces a veto—is worse than no resolution at all. Of course, we remain deeply concerned for the more than 270,000 civilians tragically affected by the conflict and now being held in camps for internally displaced persons in northern Sri Lanka. Throughout the conflict, the UK repeatedly called on both the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to

abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law. The UK supports the EU's call for an investigation into the alleged violations of international humanitarian law. The UN remains engaged with Sri Lanka. The Secretary-General visited on 23 May and reported to Security Council colleagues in an informal briefing.

Simon Hughes: The Minister has helpfully said that the Government want an investigation into crimes in Sri Lanka. How does he think that that will best be taken forward? What is the best way of getting the quickest and most effective investigation into what has been going on?

Mr. Lewis: It is by ensuring that through the UN processes there is consensus that a process should be undertaken, but one that is transparent and credible, in which the international community can have confidence and which will allow those people who feel that that they have been the victims of infringements of human rights to know that there will be a level of justice. The UK will be arguing and fighting within the global architecture to ensure that there is not only an investigation, but a robust, credible and transparent investigation into the events that have taken place.

In crisis situations, the priority should be to take collective action that is as swift and effective as possible. That covers a range of things, including diplomatic, peaceful and humanitarian measures. Its invocation may help to focus international attention and to facilitate agreement on collective action, but it could also hinder it. That does not prevent the international community from acting in the spirit of the R2P—the responsibility to protect—but the action itself must remain the primary concern. The EU and UN have called on the Sri Lankan Government to build a realistic prospect of a sustainable peace that addresses the legitimate grievances of all communities.

With regard to human rights issues, it was right to support the Sri Lanka special session with the EU and like-minded partners to call attention to a situation in which there has been significant and unacceptable loss of life and prolonged suffering of civilians displaced by the conflict. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the UK voted against the final resolution tabled by Sri Lanka at the HRC and regrets that a consensual outcome was impossible, despite the fact that the EU did everything to try to engage constructively. However, the session was not only about a resolution. Many important interventions were made during the debate, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights calling for an independent inquiry to ensure accountability for human rights violations committed on all sides.

I shall conclude by focusing on the more general question of UN reform. There are two urgent priorities. One is reforming the Security Council—to which both the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North referred—to make it far more representative. Permanent reform remains the ultimate prize, but an intermediate solution such as that set out in the report of the high-level panel on threats, challenges and change would be a helpful first step. Such reform would consolidate the Security Council's primacy as the authoritative body on maintaining international peace and security. It would counter charges of irrelevance made by those who do not yet have the stake that they feel they deserve, and acknowledge that those nations need to be part of the solution.

The second element of reform is to deliver system-wide coherence across the UN, building on the November 2006 high-level panel report, "Delivering as One". Massive growth in UN development, humanitarian and environmental systems is not yet matched by the coherence that would allow them to be sufficiently effective and efficient. Some $15 billion-worth of official development assistance is channelled through the UN, and that money must be used to best effect. That is particularly relevant in the context of the current economic crisis. For example, 23 separate agencies working on water issues in the UN system is not an efficient division of labour. We must continue to drive forward the "One UN" reform processes being piloted in eight countries around the world.

Better ways of managing our global affairs will emerge from multilateral negotiations. We remain committed to that. From civil society—my hon. Friend referred to the central importance of civil society in situations such as this—to business, and from public health to terrorism, there are just too many reasons why we need multilateral approaches. We must ensure that the platform for that continues to be a United Nations, but a United Nations that is reformed and fit for the 21st century and that can respond properly and nimbly to humanitarian crises and tragedies such as the one that we are seeing unfold in Sri Lanka.

5 pm

Sitting adjourned without Question put Standing Order No. 10(11)).

Westminster Hall

Thursday 11 June 2009

[MR. HYWEL WILLIAMS *in the Chair*]

Policing in the 21st Century

[Relevant documents: Policing in the 21st Century: Seventh Report from the Home Affairs Committee, Session 2007-08, HC 364-I, and the Government's response, Cm 7553.]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*(Ms Butler.)*

2.30 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to be present on this occasion, with you in the Chair, Mr. Williams. I am extremely grateful to the Liaison Committee and to the House for allowing us to debate the Home Affairs Committee's seventh report of the last Session, which considered the subject of policing in the 21st century. The purpose is to discuss the issues raised in our inquiry, consider developments since the report's publication and address the Government's response.

I welcome the new Home Office team, led by the new Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, West and Hessle (Alan Johnson). I also welcome the new Minister who, I understand, has sought asylum from the Ministry of Justice in the calmer waters of Marsham street. It is always a pleasure to take part in a debate with the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), who has spoken often and eloquently on policing matters on behalf of the Opposition. I also welcome the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes). I am sure that we will be joined later by other right hon. and hon. Members.

I pay tribute to the former Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who did an excellent job. She was always willing to engage with the Select Committee on a range of issues, especially policing, which is right at the top of our agenda. I also pay tribute to the former Minister for policing, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), who was very willing to engage with us and Members on both sides of the House on policing issues. We wish them well on their chosen paths.

I and Committee members are immensely proud of our report. We decided to look in depth at policing, rather than conduct a one-off investigation. Members worked extremely hard to produce what I think is the Home Affairs Committee's definitive report on policing. I thank Committee members for all their hard work. During our inquiry, we found examples of excellent practice, as well as areas that need dramatic improvement. The Committee was keen not to be confined within the walls of Westminster, so we travelled around the country looking at policing in different areas of England and Wales. I am pleased to say that we met stakeholders in places such as Newark, Reading, Monmouth, Colchester, Manchester and Stockport. All those visits provided us with an excellent opportunity to assess good practice and, in a sense, to act as a catalyst for it to be shared.

Witnesses painted an accurate picture of their personal experiences of policing in the 21st century. We heard from Sir Norman Bettison, from the Association of Chief Police Officers, and from Paul McKeever, the chairman of the Police Federation. We also heard from constables on the beat and a custody sergeant. Far too often, in Select Committee inquiries, we hear only from the top bods. In this sort of inquiry, however, it was important to look at the grass roots and the people on the front line of policing. We were pleased to see so many of them, either at evidence sessions or at our stakeholder meetings. Since the report's publication, I have been approached by politicians, stakeholders, police officers and victims of crime who found the report refreshing and, in one view, essential reading on policing in this country. I hope that the Minister, even though he was appointed only last Thursday, has had a chance to read it and that he shares its conclusions.

The police service employs about 145,000 police officers, 77,000 police staff, 16,000 police community support officers and 14,500 special constables. It is one of the great institutions of our country and is essential to the make-up of our society. The aim of our inquiry was to establish the key challenges facing the police in the 21st century and what we need to do to ensure that they are equipped to meet them. That is set against a background of dissatisfaction among the public with the police service and among many senior officers with the increasingly broad and unwieldy role that they are expected to fill.

During the inquiry, which ran from February to July 2008, we considered the role of the police, particularly their ability to deal with 21st century social trends, including alcohol-related crime; the effects of increased immigration; their relationship with the public; funding; how to increase effectiveness through reducing bureaucracy; collaboration between forces; and making more use of police staff and other members of the work force. We drew a number of conclusions. The number of responsibilities placed on the police service expanded significantly in the late 20th century. It is now expected to deal with new dangers, such as internet-based child pornography and the terrorist threat, as well as tasks inherited from other organisations, such as victim support and monitoring sex offenders in the community. In the words of one police officer who gave evidence to us, is it really their job to take lost dogs home? We called for a fundamental review of their role.

In addition, pressure to meet quantitative Home Office targets has often caused officers to prioritise trivial offences rather than dealing with the most serious crimes. We welcome the Government's undertaking in the policing Green Paper, which was published during our inquiry, to replace top-down targets with locally set priorities. We also encouraged greater use of officer discretion, backed by more efficient supervision. Public expectations of the police are not being met—worryingly, when last surveyed, in 2007-08, only half the population thought that the police were doing a good job, despite the continued fall in crime. The public want the police to be more active in dealing with minor crime and antisocial behaviour. We recommended that the police be more visible and responsive to the public and give greater consideration to the needs of the victim in investigating crimes. Communication is vital between victims and police, and reporting back on the progress of investigations could provide the answer to restoring public confidence in the police.

[Keith Vaz]

When right hon. and hon. Gentlemen visit their constituencies tomorrow, they will be visited by people with concerns about the police. Usually, the problem is that they do not know what is happening about their case—they do not usually have a complaint. With good customer service, many cases can be dealt with very quickly, without the need for people to see MPs. I hope, therefore, that by improving communication we can cut the time taken to deal with complaints about how the police handle their job.

Government grants to the police have increased by 19 per cent. over the past decade. Overall police spending was estimated at £12.6 billion in 2007-08. However, a number of functions are putting particular pressure on police resources. Foreign nationals take longer and cost more for police forces to process than British citizens. Rapid immigration has led to funding shortfalls in some areas. The Government must give greater assistance to forces in areas experiencing rapid population change.

We discovered that a huge amount of police time and money is spent dealing with alcohol-related crime. Changes in the licensing laws mean that forces have to deploy officers for longer. We conclude in our report not that the change in the licensing laws had resulted in more crime, but that the work load of the police had increased because pubs and clubs were open for longer. Some 45 per cent. of victims of violence describe their assailants as being under the influence of alcohol, and 70 per cent. of police officers believe that attending alcohol-related incidents diverts them from tackling of crime.

We supported the principle of mandatory contributions to policing from alcohol retailers; we advocated that the practice of loss leading should be ended; and we felt that it was important that there should be compulsory, and not voluntary, standards for the alcohol industry. I welcome the Government's recent steps to ban irresponsible drinking promotions, such as, "All that you can drink for a fiver". I will explain later why more should be done. The Committee was keen not to be seen as a killjoy or as being responsible for the death of the happy hour. However, irresponsible drinking can turn into "unhappy hours" for victims of alcohol-related crime. Drinking responsibly is not a crime and should not be treated as such, but something must be done to prevent the huge drain on our public services, which is happening because of irresponsible drinking.

Faced with tight funding, the police need to identify ways to free up resources. We were disappointed at the lack of progress in reducing police bureaucracy. Witnesses estimated that officers spend around 20 to 30 per cent. of their time completing paperwork, and the average officer spends only 14 per cent. of their time on patrol. We welcome plans for shorter crime-recording forms and new processes for digitally recording stop and account. We were invited by a member of our Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Mrs. Dean), to visit Staffordshire police, which reduced its crime-recording form from 14 pages to one, which it estimates saves officers 20 to 25 minutes per form. The use of personal digital assistants in Bedfordshire has increased visible patrols from 14 to 19 per cent. for each officer. All frontline officers should be given PDAs.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds) (Con): On the right hon. Gentleman's point about the Staffordshire experience and the three other forces that piloted more officer discretion and shorter, sharper crime recording practices, was that work utilised in other forces?

Keith Vaz: As Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, I have made it my practice to write to the Home Secretary about the things that I think should and should not be shared with other parts of the country. In this case, I wrote to the then Home Secretary to suggest that the practice should be followed in every single force. It is not necessary to wait for pilots. As someone once said, "We have in Government more pilots than British Airways." If something works practically, it is essential to do it everywhere. I am not sure whether I got a reply from the former Home Secretary, but I am sure that the Minister will let us know whether that practice has been taken beyond the pilot areas. I certainly found the practice—and I know that the hon. Gentleman must have found it—extremely useful.

We supported the greater use of non-warranted police staff in areas in which it is cost-effective, but not to the extent that the number of police officers required for maintaining public order is significantly reduced. Initially, the arrival of PCSOs was treated with concern by some police officers, but now they are a vital part of the local police service. It is important that we give credit to the police for the way they have worked so closely with PCSOs when, initially, there was concern from organisations such as the Police Federation.

Regional collaboration on sharing services to cut costs works well in some parts of England and Wales, but progress elsewhere is too slow. There also remains a gap in the provision for tackling serious and organised crime. I am pleased to say that the Committee is shortly to hold an inquiry into the Serious Organised Crime Agency. At the same time, it will examine the work done by Europol, which is now led by a dynamic young British former police officer, and which celebrates this year its 10th anniversary.

We did not support forced mergers as a solution, but we felt that if regional and local police forces wish to collaborate, they should be allowed to do so. As a local MP, I do not want to see my police force in Leicester being run from Nottingham, which is probably where it will end up. For some reason, everything is always put in Nottingham rather than in Leicester or Derby. I am very happy to see police forces collaborating, but I do not want to return to the policy of forcing mergers, because it was unsuccessful.

We found no evidence of a drop in the number or quality of police officer applicants. Officer posts attract, on average, six applicants. However, we had some concerns over retention, especially in the south-east. Regional forces lost 1,038 officers to the Metropolitan police over the previous five years. That is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Martin Salter) successfully highlighted to the Committee.

As for the rest of the work force, we advocated greater standardisation in the deployment of PCSOs and consideration of whether they could be granted some powers of arrest in very exceptional circumstances. We did not advocate affirmative action, but we were

concerned about the lack of Government progress on the diversity targets set by the Government themselves under a previous Home Secretary, now Lord Chancellor, following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. We felt that greater efforts should be made to encourage more people from the ethnic minority communities and more women into the senior levels of policing in this country.

Finally, we concluded that the Home Office should give back more control over policing decisions to local forces, which would result in a bottom-up approach to policing. There should be greater accountability of policing to the public at a local level. However, we were clear that proposals originally put forward by the Home Office to restructure police authorities did not meet that need and threatened to undermine the partnership that was already working between the police and local authorities as well as having the potential to be exploited by extremist parties.

Following our representations to the Government, in the report and in a letter following the one-off session that we held in December, we were delighted to hear that the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redditch, withdrew her proposals to introduce direct elections to police authorities. Instead, the Policing and Crime Bill, which has reached Committee in another place, inserts into the Police Act 1996 a requirement for police authorities to have regard to the views on policing of the people in their area. We were pleased that the Government strongly welcomed our report and that the then Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, was able to appear before us in March to give us an update on the recommendations. However, we are disappointed that the Government have failed to take up our recommendations in a few key areas, notably around minimum pricing for alcohol.

The Government's chief medical officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, has since proposed the introduction of a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol, which would mean that a standard bottle of wine could not be sold for less than £4, a 2-litre bottle of cider for less than £5.50 and the average six-pack of lager for less than £6. He considered such a move could, after 10 years, lead to 3,400 fewer deaths and 100,000 fewer hospital admissions a year, and that it would also have a significant impact on crime rates. Alas, the Government did not follow the medical advice of their own chief medical officer. The Policing and Crime Bill introduces some measures towards reducing alcohol-related harm—for example, it increases the maximum fine for consuming alcohol in a designated public place—but the Committee feels that they are not sufficient. I am sure the Minister will give us more information. We welcome what the Government have done so far, but we believe they need to go much further.

Since our inquiry, the UK has fallen into a recession and there are concerns about the potential impact on crime levels and speculation about capping the numbers of officers. I hope the Minister can reassure the House that no cuts will be made to the police force in England and Wales in the foreseeable future. The chief constable of Gloucestershire, Dr. Timothy Brain, who gave evidence to the Committee in March, described what tends to happen during recession. He told us that during the second half of the 1970s through to the mid-point of the 1980s, crime rose by about 124 per cent.

The police have received record funding in the past decade; we must ensure that police forces continue to be properly resourced to meet the challenges. We were therefore concerned to hear of the problems faced by some forces—they were described to the Committee as second-tier forces—that are losing out because of the police funding formula. The new chief constable of West Midlands police, Chris Sims, warned last week that officer and staff numbers are likely to be cut. The Home Secretary must take heed of Sir Ronnie Flanagan's recommendations on the formula.

Capping is also causing some forces concern: Surrey police authority is seeking a judicial review of a Government decision to cap its budget, which resulted in a loss of £1.6 million; Derbyshire police authority is also planning an appeal to the Government against future budget restrictions; and Leicestershire police narrowly escaped being capped last year. Forces should never be in a position in which they may have to cap their budget. This Government have done so much for policing. Surely we should ensure that the situation does not come to cuts in our forces.

I know that the Minister is concerned about his budget, but I say this to him: the National Policing Improvement Agency has spent £70 million on consultants at the same time as police forces have to cut officers. That is simply not acceptable. The funding difficulties make it imperative that the police operate as efficiently as possible. It is estimated that officers spend around 20 to 30 per cent. of their time on paperwork.

The previous Policing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, told us in March that 26,188 hand-held devices had been issued to police forces across the country as part of the Government's target of delivering 30,000 devices by March 2010. Jan Berry's lead on reducing bureaucracy in the police provided the Committee with an excellent framework to investigate that further—it is impressive that someone can go from marching with 100,000 police officers and support staff through the streets of Whitehall and end up becoming the Government's tsar on cutting red tape, but we welcome her appointment and look forward to her report. My own local constabulary, Leicestershire, recently deployed hand-held devices to 450 beat officers and PCSOs who patrol on foot or bicycle after discovering that officers were spending at least one third of a nine-hour shift at their desks accessing or recording information on the computer systems. The Committee and I want all front-line police officers to have access to a mobile device.

We were pleased to be assured that our concerns about capacity issues on the Airwave radio network, which is now used by all officers, are being taken seriously, particularly in the light of the forthcoming Olympics. However, in an article in *Jane's Police Review* last week, Barrie Trower, an independent research physicist, predicted that Airwave users could be at risk of thousands of slow-growing brain tumours. The Minister has just taken up his post, but I hope that he can assure us that there are no health dangers with Airwave.

The Committee continues to scrutinise the work of the police and in the next 10 days we will publish our report on the policing of the G20 protests. I hope that it will recommend positive action for the police to take in response to the criticisms they have received.

I am sure that the House will be aware of the disturbing news this week that police officers allegedly tortured

[Keith Vaz]

suspected drug dealers during questioning. I hope that the Minister ensures that those allegations are investigated quickly and that they are responded to with the appropriate action. As I am sure he knows, if he does not do that, the Committee will—it is very willing to hold further inquiries.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Minister and the hon. Members for Bury St. Edmunds and for Chesterfield for their presence here today, and members of my Committee for their work. I hope that the Government continue to take our conclusions and recommendations into account in working towards delivering a first-class police service that will be fit for purpose in the 21st century.

2.56 pm

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield) (LD): I congratulate the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), on his usual excellent work. I have already heard him speak on policing once this week. He is always assiduous in chasing issues in Parliament that relate to his Committee's work. I also congratulate the members of the Committee on their contribution.

The report is a superb example of exactly what Select Committees are supposed to be about. It is a tour de force, if you will excuse the pun, Mr. Williams. It looks ahead at the policing issues that will be relevant in the 21st century. Select Committees are good at producing such work. I declare an interest as someone who has been a member of the Children, Schools and Families Committee, which was formerly the Education and Skills Committee, for most of the past eight years, so I have seen the process from that side of the fence. Select Committees are excellent because their reports are largely impartial. Obviously politics gets in the way sometimes but by and large, in my experience, including from reading reports by Committees with which I was not directly involved, Committees tend to avoid the pitfall of politicisation. They tend to be impartial and to fulfil the hope that was behind them when they were set up in their strengthened form in the great reform of 1979.

Select Committee reports are not Government reports—the information is not obscured by or filtered through the Government or the civil service—and they are not Opposition reports that are written purely for political purposes. Committees take a huge raft of evidence from expert witnesses of every variety. For example, a section of the Home Affairs Committee's report deals with alcohol. Although the Committee heard from the alcohol trade, which obviously had a certain point of view on minimum pricing and controls on pubs, it also heard from the police, community bodies and local authorities. Committees produce excellent, up-to-date summaries of expert opinion on issues, and their reports are presented coherently and concisely. They provide ammunition for a two-hour parliamentary debate such as this, but they will also be referred to over and again for years to come. This report will be referred to every time policing is raised in Parliament, during elections and in the press. Select Committee reports rumble on for many years after they are produced.

As I said, the report is an excellent, outstanding example of what Select Committees do so well. There is a lot of talk at the moment about reforming how this place works, and we have heard various suggestions even in the last day or two about how to strengthen Select Committees. I hope that we go a long way down that path so that Select Committees can better fulfil their potential.

I will not try to cover every aspect of the report—the Chair of the Committee, in his excellent summary, could only scratch the surface—but I will pick out some things that particularly stood out for me. One, which has already been referred to, was the general issue of targets and expectations for the police in the 21st century, the situation on which has been both improved and worsened by the advent of modern communications, the internet and rapid communication such as e-mail.

People now expect a much faster, if not instantaneous, response. They send a complaint by text message or e-mail to their beat officer at the appropriate address and want an immediate response. MPs have had the same experience, as the volume of casework has increased massively for MPs and councillors in local government. It has put a lot of extra pressure on the police. In some ways, that is quite right, because it makes the police more accountable, but in other ways it raises people's expectations and they can be easily disappointed.

There is a danger that some legislative changes concerning community calls for action are creating more expectations for the police—and on local councillors in partnership—to do something. If the residents of a council ward make a community call for action, they want the police and local authority to do something immediately. If the resources are not there and the police cannot respond immediately, there will be disappointment. Those issues are highlighted in the section of the Committee report dealing with what the police do, what is expected of them, what targets are being set for them by central Government, and what local residents are demanding.

One interesting point about recorded crime that stands out is the question whether the crime situation is getting worse. All the statistics tell us that the position on crime is getting better. Page 10 of the report cites an interesting statistic.

> "Changes in society led to a steady rise in recorded crime levels between the 1950s and the 1990s, with recorded crime per officer increasing dramatically in the 1980s from an average of 26 crimes per officer in 1982, to 42 per officer in 1992. This figure has since remained fairly constant."

It is instructive to bear those bald statistics in mind. Crime rose steadily in the UK and the western world from the 1950s onwards—it did not particularly matter who was in government. The Conservatives were in government for 13 years from 1951 to 1964. In the later '60s, there was a Labour Government, and then there was the Conservatives again, then Labour and then the Conservatives for 18 years. Now we have had Labour for 12 years. However, crime figures went up steadily—with some dramatic jumps, as in the 1980s—for the best part of half a century in the western world and the UK. Across the western world, they have tended to level off or decrease, as with the famous example of New York, which some people attribute directly to zero-tolerance policing and others simply explain by pointing out, "Well, you've got a change in age demographic in the population of the USA, and crime has gone down all over the country, regardless of whether there has been the zero-tolerance approach of New York policing." When we try to apply those lessons to English policing,

we need to bear those statistics in mind, rather than following the knee-jerk reactions in the headlines. The newspapers tell us that we are in the midst of the worst crime wave ever, even though the statistics, as evidenced in the report, do not bear that out.

Equally, the report asked the valid question whether we can always trust the stats. The public certainly do not. As the report points out, only a few months ago, in 2008, we discovered that some police forces had not been recording certain types of criminal offence in the right category, which meant that the number of crimes of serious violence, far from falling, should have jumped by 20 per cent. That was due simply to errors or differences in how police forces collected the stats.

That situation makes the clear case that we must take the collection and presentation of statistics on sensitive issues such as crime out of the hands of the Government—they must not be seen to be political or be changed for political purposes—and put that into the hands of an independent body. In that way, I hope, we would get to a point at which the public and the media would trust the stats, instead of saying, as the public so often do, "Well, your statistics might show that crime has been falling fairly steadily, but we don't believe it. We think it's much worse—although not around here." As the report points out, people say that they think the crime situation is quite good where they live, but that it is generally bad. It is the same for education. Lots of people say, "Schools are really bad these days, but the one my children attend is very good". Indeed, recent surveys show that people say, "Members of Parliament are all crooks, but my local MP is actually quite good." We need objective statistics in which people can have a bit more trust.

The question of what the police do has been raised. I was struck that the borough commander of Hackney police, Chief Superintendent Steve Dann, asked what the police were there for and what the public and the politicians wanted them to do.

> "I think we need some clarity around that...Why do we take lost property? Why do we take lost dogs? Is that what we should be doing?...You have some people saying: 'Enforcement. Let's enforce. That is your job'; other people are saying we should be in prevention, education"

and community outreach. Where is the balance between all those things?

I have a local example of what is happening throughout the country. In the past few months in Derbyshire, we have seen a shift in the enforcement of minor traffic legislation, such as that on parking and so forth, because it has been taken away from the police. They had often said, "We haven't got the time to do that. We have other, more pressing demands on our attention," but people in some places were getting irritated that local parking regulations were not being enforced.

As across the country, therefore, enforcement in Derbyshire has gone to the local authorities—the county councils and the boroughs and districts in collaboration—and they have put it out to a private organisation known as the "green giants", because of their new green uniforms. Since they took over from the police a few months ago, they are much more visible and enforce the rules and regulations more proactively. Some motorists are not happy about that, because they are now being prevented from parking illegally, but lots of residents are happy about it, because residents parking and similar measures are now being enforced, whereas before the police would just say, "We haven't got the time to do that." Chief Superintendent Steve Dann's comments are apposite. We need to talk to the public, politicians at all levels and the media to ask what we expect the police to do.

On the issue of Government directives about what the police should do, we see the same tension at a much higher level. On the one hand police forces have been told, "You've got to look very carefully to assess crime threats, serious crime and the terrorist threat. You've got to have more collaboration"—perhaps involving the super-forces that were mooted but have, thankfully, been dropped recently—"so that you can tackle the most serious forms of crime, like terrorism and organised crime." On the other hand, we want much more neighbourhood policing and a greater uniformed officer presence out on the streets to tackle what members of the public are most concerned about: low-level, everyday crime such as vandalism, petty nuisance and drunkenness in the streets. We need more clarity on who decides the priorities and to restore much more local control and accountability.

Some of the evidence in the Select Committee's report made those points extremely well. Brian Paddick, a former assistant commissioner in the Metropolitan police, said:

> "The problem with the Home Office was nationally imposed targets, some of which were having perverse outcomes",

although they were set with the best of intentions. He continued:

> "For example, in terms of offences brought to justice, I am sure the Committee will realise that it is one point on the score board for a complex case of murder which might take 18 months to investigate and six months to try in court, provided there is a conviction that counts as one offence brought to justice",

but it is also one point for

> "a cannabis warning that takes 20 minutes to deal with".

If police are getting pressure from the centre as well as from the inspector who assesses police forces—if they are being told, "You've got to have so many cases brought to justice. Why are you behind the national average? Why are you behind your target?"—there is an inevitable pressure, as in education with league tables and Ofsted inspections, to work to the target and do the things that tick boxes, even if that is not the best example of how policing should be done in a particular area.

Some might point out that at the time when Brian Paddick gave that evidence, he was the Liberal Democrat candidate for Mayor of London, but Chief Superintendent Dave Hudson of Essex police made exactly the same point in his evidence. His division

> "had a daily target of 20.5 'sanction detections', with the same weighting accorded to every detection, regardless of the seriousness of the offence."

The more serious the offence, the longer it takes to investigate and prosecute, and the more trivial the offence, the easier it is to deal with, but the two get exactly the same weighting. That is a consequence—unforeseen, I am sure—of a Government initiative to hold police forces to account.

How should police forces be held to account? That is where there is a need to go back to local control and accountability, not through the elected sheriff model that the Conservative party talks about, and on which

[Paul Holmes]

its spokesman will doubtless elaborate later, but through locally elected police boards. That is not the macho individual in charge of everything, who gets the headlines and creates a stir, but a more responsive, democratic model, through which the local electorate, rather than distant central Government in London, can hold things to account.

Keith Vaz: I am following what the hon. Gentleman says with great interest. The current system might well be okay, but the problem is the visibility of members of the police authority. The public do not feel that the police are held to account. The system of an elected police authority exists, and individuals are elected or appointed by councillors, who appoint one of their number to the authority—it is usually chaired by a councillor. However, the authority and the people on it are invisible, rather like people on primary care trusts or health authorities. They are on those bodies to represent the public, but the public do not know who they are.

Paul Holmes: I agree absolutely, because that is why some people have said, "What is wrong with the existing police authority board? The structure is already there." The authorities will now say, "We are making much more effort these days to go and talk to the people in our area." The Derbyshire police authority does a good job. It has been incredibly proactive in holding parish hall meetings all over Derbyshire to consult the public and explain what is going on. There is now online crime mapping, as well as other initiatives, and a lot of local response and consultation, but how many people turn up to the meetings, and how many feel that they have a direct input?

Most members of the police authority have been appointed in one way or another. Even the third—I think that is the proportion—who are elected councillors have been elected to other authorities, such as the county, district or borough council, and then co-opted on to the police authority. There is no direct line of accountability. That is why we suggest that there should be proper, elected police boards rather than appointed quangos—even if part of the quango is elected in some way. There should be a directly elected and directly accountable authority, but not a single, macho, elected sheriff.

Mr. Ruffley: The hon. Gentleman is giving a very considered précis of Liberal Democrat policy, but just so that I can be clear about this point, would the election to the boards that he describes be by proportional representation? If so, what lessons does he draw from the election of the British National party to various county council seats in the past few days?

Paul Holmes: The first point would be that the election of the BNP to a tiny number of county council seats happened under first past the post, not proportional representation. I do not have any sympathy with the idea that the democratic process should be rigged to exclude certain people, rather than that they should be defeated in democratic argument. People with extreme political views may get elected under any electoral system. As I have said, most of the success of the BNP—it has been very small in the past 10 or 20 years—has happened under first past the post. We cannot change the electoral system to prevent people from getting elected. If enough people want to elect a certain group of politicians, that is democracy—it is what democracy is all about. It is the job of politicians in the main parties to put across the arguments and policies to prevent that from happening.

Hywel Williams (in the Chair): Order. Perhaps we can get back to debating the police.

Paul Holmes: I apologise, Mr. Williams, but the matter is directly relevant to the aspect of the Select Committee report that we are discussing and the question of how to get necessary accountability. The Liberal Democrats would want proportional representation for police boards, as for every election, but the question is what sort of proportional representation to use. Opponents always choose the worst example they can think of, such as the Israeli list system or the closed list system for the European Parliament. That is not the method that any sensible person who wants PR would suggest. The single transferable vote that was adopted a few years ago with massive success by New Zealand, which has an English-style democratic system, is exactly what we would propose, not the bad systems that people hold up as an example.

The question of directly elected boards and how to hold the police to account leads on to the section of the Select Committee report about resources and how to finance the police. At the moment, as the report clearly and succinctly explains, most funding for the police, like most instruction for the police, comes from London. We are one of the most centralised countries in the western world. Some 90 per cent. of taxation is raised by No. 11 Downing street. It goes, effectively, to No. 11 Downing street, and is handed out with strings attached. No other western country works in that way. Other countries raise money locally and spend it locally on police, education, health and other things, and need not ask the capital city for permission to do so. We are the exception, as with PR. The Liberal Democrats argue that the resources issue should be dealt with differently, which is why we want locally elected police boards. We do not want them just so they can *do* what police authorities do now. We are thinking about much more powerful local police authorities with power over the raising of finance.

The Select Committee report sets out clearly why such reform is needed. Although there is variation across the country—I think that the figure is as low as 50 per cent. in Surrey—most police forces, like most local authorities, get anything up to 70 or 75 per cent. of their funding as grant from central Government. Only 20 to 30 per cent. comes from the local council tax precept that the police authority sets. That has led to some immense problems for police forces. I mentioned Surrey, and there was a debate two days ago in Westminster Hall on the Surrey capping issue, during which I managed to make some contributions with reference to the Derbyshire comparison that has already been raised. The Government hand out most of the money, give most of the directives to the police about what they must do, and set most of the targets that they must meet, but they use a formula that they admitted in 2006 was inadequate and unfair, leading them to introduce a new formula based on need. They then said that they could not introduce the new formula, and thus told Derbyshire, "You need

£5 million more a year if you are to deliver the policing that we, the Government, say you should, but you cannot have it."

As the Committee's report points out, some authorities have been even worse hit. It points out that the West Midlands force received nearly 11 per cent.—£48 million—less than the funding formula would have given it in 2007-08, if that formula had been applied. The Government said, "You need all this money, but you cannot have it." Yet another force, Northumbria, gets 12 per cent. more than it should, according to the central Government funding formula. The system of ceilings and floors—to ensure that change takes place relatively slowly and that all an authority's surplus money is not taken away immediately to be given to an underfunded one—is understandable if there is a sensible and logical time scale in which the funding schemes are brought together so that everyone is funded equitably. However, that is not happening. It is happening for fire authorities and, to some extent, for local authorities, but not for police authorities.

Quite a number of authorities, including Derbyshire, have been told, "You are badly underfunded and need more money than you get to do your job. When we send inspectors to assess your police force, we will assess you against forces that are being paid more money than they need to do the job, and we will criticise you because you are not doing your job properly, even though you are underfunded. Who is underfunding you? We are—central Government. What can you do about it? Nothing." That is because if an authority tries, as Derbyshire has done this year with support from MPs and councillors of all three parties, and as Surrey has done, to raise the money from the council tax precept, the Government caps it.

Derbyshire is not being forced to rebill this year, which would waste large amounts of money to save slightly larger amounts, but it is being informed that it will lose the relevant amount next year, so it is being told, "We are not going to take the money off you this year; we'll take it off you next year." Derbyshire must lose £1.6 million, but that amounts to 60 front-line police officers losing their jobs to meet the Government's council tax capping directive. I am not the one who says so; it is Mick Creedon, the chief constable of Derbyshire. Surrey is in an even worse position and other authorities, such as Leicestershire and Lincolnshire, went through the process last year. It is a problem across the board.

The rationale that the Government gave in the debate two days ago for what they were doing was very confused—they said that Derbyshire, for example, was setting an excessive budget. The extra money on the council tax would have raised about £1.6 million, but the Government have said that Derbyshire police are £5 million underfunded. How can raising an extra £1.6 million towards a £5 million underfunding be an excessive budget? It still does not reach the spending that the Government say is needed. It is ludicrous and illogical—and completely undemocratic. Derbyshire and Surrey police authorities, and others last year, consulted their council tax payers and all the different councils and elected bodies at different levels, as well as getting MPs from different parties on board, and central Government said, "You cannot do this." There is an utter dislocation between local police forces and the Government, who told them that there must be localism, that they must be accountable to local people and that they must do what local people want.

People in Derbyshire want police on the beat. They do not understand why Derbyshire has 380 fewer people in uniform on the streets than an equivalent shire county, or why some have more people on the beat because they have been given the money that should have gone to Derbyshire. However, Derbyshire cannot do anything about that. It cannot raise the money through local taxation, even if local people are willing for that to happen, because the Government say no. There cannot be localism and police forces cannot be accountable to the local area if that is not allowed to happen. That is why we must change completely the resourcing of police forces.

There must be local accountability. That is why we argue that police authorities cannot continue to be, in effect, appointed quangos, albeit some of their members have been elected to other authorities. There must be properly elected police boards to deliver the finance and local accountability that the Government say is needed, but prevent from happening, and towards which the Select Committee report shows in admirable detail and clarity we should move.

The immigration and foreign workers section of the Select Committee report was interesting, if only for one sentence. The evidence shows that the policing issue related to immigrant workers and communities—contrary to public or media opinion—is that

"foreign nationals are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime."

In areas such as Chesterfield, where significant groups of eastern European workers have arrived in recent years, the cost of providing interpreters is a great burden on police forces, especially given the range of languages that are spoken. However, they are more likely to be interpreting for a victim of crime than for somebody who has been charged with committing a crime.

Government funding for interpreters is too slow and ineffective to meet the problem. It is based on the 10-yearly censuses, so it does not take account of quick population movements. Only two years ago, a large number of eastern European workers came to this country. Many of them are now leaving because of the recession, or because they have earned the money they wanted to raise and are going back to set up businesses in their home countries. We benefit from their work and the economy in places such as Poland will benefit in return, which is what the European Union is all about.

The Government funding formula does not respond to the problem of the cost of interpreters quickly enough. We see the same problem in education, housing and elsewhere. It was worth pointing out just that one sentence of the Select Committee report to show that foreign nationals are more likely to be the victims of crime than the cause of it. However, the problem of the cost of interpreters must be dealt with.

Alcohol has been dealt with today by the Chairman of the Select Committee, and it has been discussed at length during the passage of the Policing and Crime Bill and in other debates. There is a missed opportunity. The 24-hour café culture that the Licensing Act 2003 envisaged has not come about. Instead, we have more drinking in town centres and it is more spread out. The police used to need extra numbers on duty from 11 o'clock at night

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to 2 o'clock in the morning on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. That police presence must now be spread out right through to 6 o'clock in the morning. That is the experience in Chesterfield, and it causes more difficulties for policing and makes it more expensive.

According to my local police and the evidence given to the Policing and Crime Bill Committee, the main problem is not town centre drinking venues and the results of the Licensing Act 2003, but under-age drinking. The problem is cheap booze in off-licences and off-premises, with cheap super-strength lagers and ciders being sold at rock-bottom prices as loss-leaders to get people into supermarkets. Regrettably, the Government sidestepped that problem in the Policing and Crime Bill. There is much talk of strengthening powers to control licensees and pubs, but in that proposal, too, there is far too much direction from London, instead of local authorities being able to decide where the problems are. Local authorities know their areas far better than anybody sitting here in London. All the emphasis has been on that issue and there has been nothing about stopping super-strength, cheap booze getting into the hands of under-age drinkers on the streets so easily.

Whenever I am on patrol with the police, police community support officers and special constables in Chesterfield, I ask what is the biggest source of problems. They always say that it is the early-evening nuisance around the high streets, shopping centres and play areas where kids congregate with cheap, super-strength booze that they have bought from off-premises. It is much harder to control that problem than town centre pubs, because it is scattered across the community.

The Government seem to be closing their eyes to that problem, as the eloquent testimony of the Chairman of the Select Committee showed. I agree with the Select Committee recommendations on alcohol disorder zones and the "polluter pays" principle, under which the pubs and all-night drinking establishments that cause these problems should help to pay to solve them. I also agree with minimum pricing and the control of loss-leading sales of cheap alcohol. Unfortunately, the Government seem to be avoiding tackling these issues.

What I said in my opening comments is also true of knife crime. Although crime has been falling, nobody believes the statistics. Many people have a fear of crime, but they do not read the statistics. The statistics on knife crime, if they can be believed, show that it has slowly decreased over the past seven years. However, especially after last year's feast of press coverage on some of the tragic murders, everybody believes that knife crime has soared through the roof. In truth, the press suddenly paid major attention to these tragic deaths, having not done so for the previous six years. There was a debate about knife crime in the main Chamber on Tuesday, which was repeated in part in yesterday's debate on youth crime in this Chamber, in which I participated. Nobody disputes the seriousness of the issues and the need to deal with knife crime, but the interesting statistics in the report suggest that knife crime is in slow decline rather than soaring through the roof.

There has been much discussion in the debates of the past two days of how we should deal with knife crime. Intelligence-led policing is one method, and there are good examples of that in the past 18 months in London. Targeted stop-and-search powers have been used in problem areas, and mobile arch metal detectors have been used. On a recent Select Committee visit to New York, we saw those arches in use at the entrance of every school that we visited. We are a long way from having to go down that road, but the use of mobile arches and intelligent stop-and-search powers has a big role to play, as long as we never go back to the heavy-handed days of the sus laws, which caused such problems in the 1970s.

One example of intelligence-led policing that has been mentioned in recent debates comes from Cardiff, where the accident and emergency unit logged anonymous reports of exactly where stabbing incidents occurred. Such schemes can cause many problems, as the medical profession does not want to report all stabbing and gunshot incidents to the police because of issues such as patient confidentiality. However, in Cardiff, incidents were reported anonymously. The police used the information not to pursue individuals, but to create a crime map and identify where the stabbings were taking place. They then diverted resources into the problem areas. In Cardiff, there was a 40 per cent. reduction in knife crime and stabbings simply through sensible, intelligence-led policing. The use of computers to analyse hot spots on week by week has worked well in other areas of policing.

Regrettably, although the Government have looked at that experiment and introduced some pilots—we have heard that they have more pilots than the Air Force—it has not been rolled out. It is such an obvious and simple technique and has been proven to work. It means that less police time is wasted, because efforts can be targeted most effectively. Why are successful examples, such as the one in Cardiff, not being adopted more widely?

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. David Hanson): We discussed this matter in Tuesday's debate in the main Chamber, so the hon. Gentleman knows that the Government have spoken to the consultant involved in the Cardiff example, who addressed the ministerial group dealing with the tackling knives action plan. From memory, we have increased the number of hospitals in knife crime action plan areas that use data sharing to about 45 or 46. The Government have focused on those key areas, because knife crime is not a problem in every part of England and Wales. Data sharing should be used where it is appropriate, which is in areas that have a high level of knife crime.

Paul Holmes: They are welcome steps forward, and that comes into what I am going to say about the use of personal digital assistants.

We are moving in the right direction, but I wonder why it has taken so long, given the successful examples that have been shown to work so well. A 40 per cent. reduction in stabbings is a win-win result: the health service saves money because it does not have to treat those people, the police save money because they are able to target particular areas and reduce knife crime, and society as a whole benefits because there are not lurid newspaper headlines about yet another teenager being stabbed and perhaps dying, so everybody wins. The same approach could be applied in accident and emergency units when people are drunk and disorderly, and when incidents of grievous bodily harm have occurred, to pinpoint the pockets where trouble arises. I hope that there will be more widespread use of that approach. It requires joined-up government down to local authority

level, with areas such as health and policing pushing together get that kind of collaboration.

We have heard about police time, so I shall deal with that quickly. It is a long-standing and perennial cry that the police spend all their time filling in bits of paper instead of being out on the beat. Indeed, there are reports from 30 years ago saying that. However, there is certainly lots of evidence that has been true in the past few years. The Flanagan recommendations on revising the stop-and-account process under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 are very welcome. We heard the Staffordshire example about cutting down a form from 14 pages to one, which is an obvious thing to do.

When I went out on patrol with some of the Chesterfield officers, we stopped a group of eight or nine teenagers and people in their early 20s who were possibly drunk and disorderly in the street, but were mostly being loud and in high spirits. If the police had filled in the required forms for all nine of them, which would have involved asking their names, addresses, and why they had stopped there, it would have cut an hour or more out of their patrol time. Police officers on the front line therefore tend to find ways around filling in reams and reams of paperwork, even though they are told that they have to do it. We need to make the paperwork system as streamlined as possible. We have heard about the good examples and the good pilots, but we need to move beyond pilots.

The same is true of personal digital assistants. We have been debating and arguing about this issue for months now and the Government are moving down that road much faster. Let me give an example I have used before. Four years ago, Chesterfield borough council's housing department equipped each of its housing repair teams, which deal with its 10,000 council houses, with a van that is logged by computer and global positioning system by the people at head office. Those people know what stock is on board each van, so if they get a call for a plumbing repair, they send not the van that the GPS satellite tells them is nearest, but the one that the computerised log tells them has the correct part on board. The repair man can get the job signed off by the customer on his hand-held PDA, that information is sent back to central office, then he can get his next job from his PDA. That system saves a lot of time, because he is not driving backwards and forwards between the centre of town and the outlying areas. Those repair men are gaining a great deal of time in the day to do their jobs more effectively, cheaply and responsibly. If my borough council's housing department could do that four or five years ago, why is a similar system only just being rolled out across police forces after the pilots? Why does that common-sense usage take so long?

As the report points out, the technology is cheap. It can save at least an hour per officer per shift, and it can cost as little as 80p a day. In one authority, the use of hand-held BlackBerrys delivered £8.8 million of non-cashable savings a year. It provides secure access for the beat officer straight to the police national computer and other intelligence databases, so it is win-win all round.

Keith Vaz: As someone who is still using a mobile phone, I sometimes watch as technology develops. The point is not only that the police should be given that new technology, but that it should also be compatible with systems throughout England and Wales. One problem with the computer system is that one authority buys its own set of computers, which does not really speak to others set of computers, so it is about not only purchasing the technology but getting the procurement right so that we save money in the end.

Paul Holmes: Yes; that leads me to my penultimate point about collaboration. The Chair of the Committee has made the point that he does not want Leicestershire's police force to be directed from Nottinghamshire or Derbyshire. Equally, I do not want Chesterfield to be policed from Leicester, Nottingham or anywhere else in the vast area known as the east midlands. A few years ago, we were facing the threat of enforced mergers of police forces into super-bodies. I see that idea as a major threat, although it would be an accountant's dream. In the past few weeks, the CBI, I think, has said something like, "Let's save lots of money by merging all the police forces together, because that is what an efficient business would do." But what would happen to the customer in that situation?

The customer is the individual out on the street who wants a local policeman to respond to their local needs. If we had super-forces covering the east midlands and all the other regions in England, there would be a danger that the policing needs of Leicester, Nottingham and Derby would take priority over the rural policing needs of supposedly crime-free areas in rural parts of Derbyshire. However, rural Derbyshire is within one hour's driving distance of 20 per cent. of the rest of the UK population. Indeed, it is a selling point of the Peak District national park in Derbyshire that so many people can get to that green lung. That access causes a problem with tourist numbers, which is a good problem to deal with, but it also means that all the serious organised gangs from Sheffield, Nottingham, Leeds and Rotherham can be there in no time.

The small local shop around the corner from where I live, on Newbold road in Chesterfield, was held up at gunpoint a few months ago when we had the heavy snow, and a number of other businesses around north Derbyshire have also been held up at gunpoint. Gun crime is pretty rare around Chesterfield, so it was pretty shocking when that happened to the shop that I use regularly with my kids. The gang who did it have been through court in the past few weeks. They were from Sheffield, and they drove into north Derbyshire, because they thought they would be less well known there and that the police would not be as big, organised and on the ball as the big city force in Sheffield. They were arrested fairly quickly, and they have been sent to prison, which is good. The Surrey MPs talked about something similar in the recent Westminster Hall debate on the capping of Surrey police funding. They said that organised crime gangs come out on the motorway to the London outskirts, to what they see as easier pickings.

We do not want collaboration and super-forces to be imposed. We have backed away from that idea now, but I am sure it will rear its head again. We do not want city policing issues to dominate, so that policing is stripped away from smallish, rural areas such as Chesterfield to some super-force elsewhere. I am absolutely against enforced collaboration—I think that the Committee Chairman has made the same point—but there are areas in which collaboration makes absolute sense. Indeed, the east midlands forces have undertaken some pioneer

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case studies in England showing where police forces can collaborate on serious and organised crime, terrorism and high-level policing threats without having to force a merger of police forces.

There is a role for a national strategy in one area that the Chairman has raised—the purchase of certain technology and equipment. Police officers have pointed out to me that some things are much more standardised in America, where police cruisers all tend to be the same type of large vehicle with plenty of room. The problem with many British police cars is that there is no room on the dashboard for bits of computer kit, because of the type of cars that the police buy. Moreover, they do not get the benefits of bulk purchase and standardisation across forces that have been mentioned. There is a place for intelligent collaboration and co-operation, and for national purchasing strategies on some things, but certainly not for removing local command, control and accountability, which we should strengthen.

The title of the report is "Policing in the 21st century". As we came to the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, we faced many new challenges in policing, which is very different from what it was. The Government rightly boast that we now have more police officers per head of population than at any time in history. That is true, but we also have more need, as there are now crimes that did not exist 20 years ago. The scale of internet fraud is one example. Another issue that the Committee looked at that has not been discussed today is the fact that fraud attracts such a low rating for the police. Even though about £14 billion a year is taken in criminal fraud, it still is not a No. 1 priority for policing.

Police forces have to have dedicated teams to deal with internet fraud, internet paedophilia and, as was the case before the internet came along, child abuse. Even in the 1960s, people would not admit that child abuse existed, and did not believe that families were the main perpetrators. It simply was not talked about. Likewise, there are now police teams dedicated to dealing with domestic violence against women, and they can be extremely effective, but it was not very many years ago that that was not seen as a problem. If a husband hit his wife, it was simply seen as something that happened. The concept of policing has shifted much for the better in relation to such issues, partly because of shifting social attitudes on rape, domestic abuse or child abuse and admitting that those problems exist and that we need to do something about them, and partly because of a new wave of crimes that have come into existence, particularly in relation to the internet.

The advent of widespread car ownership has made it much easier to spread crime from one place to another. Criminals have made maximum use of the anonymity of being able to drive to a community in 20 minutes, where no one knows them at all. Again, there has been intelligent use of police technology to deal with such problems, such as car number plate recognition. Derbyshire police have told me that where automatic camera recognition has been piloted, they get so many hits that they cannot deal with them all. I have read a report of an experiment in London where cars were checked as they came across bridges over the Thames.

As we enter the 21st century, new demands are being put on police forces—for example, international terrorism is yet another problem with which they have to deal. We cannot just carry on in the same way and it is good that there are many signs of how police forces and politicians are moving in their thinking, but we have to move much faster. It is important to get that local accountability and democratic control back so that local communities can have a real say—not just in what they want, but in how it is going to be paid for. If local communities want something, they need to put their money where their mouth is. However, at the moment, central Government do not allow that to happen.

3.41 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds) (Con): Her Majesty's Opposition and I welcome this debate on the Home Affairs Committee's report "Policing in the 21st Century". The police in this country do a truly magnificent job, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances. That is brought home to those of us who work with the police service, and it was doubly brought home to me when I recently spent most of the week at the Police Federation conference in Bournemouth, where I saw dedicated men and women working very hard. In the mother of Parliaments, it is incumbent on us all to acknowledge that at the outset—such comments always bear repeating.

I welcome the Minister to his new post. I also had fruitful discussions with his predecessors. I am grateful to him for setting out the Government's views on the Committee's report. I particularly want to congratulate the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), the Chairman of the Committee, on yet another thorough, illuminating, detailed and helpful report on the challenges facing police in the 21st century. He has a great reputation for producing, with the rest of his Committee, high quality reports—this is another in a long line.

I shall not scratch the surface of the subject too much—I endorse much of what the right hon. Gentleman has already said about his report—but I will pick out some of the issues that are particularly important to Her Majesty's Opposition. The points in the report about police bureaucracy, redaction and countering risk aversion in the police service are very well made—in short, progress is not rapid enough and there is not enough of it.

The report uses the word "disappointment" in relation to the lack of progress made in reducing police bureaucracy. Since 1997, we have had at least four major reviews on reducing police bureaucracy and related subjects, but the fact remains that less than one fifth of patrol officers' time is spent on patrol. That is not acceptable to the British public and I do not think that it is acceptable to hon. Members—no matter which political party they belong to.

The sort of things mentioned by the Flanagan review and in the glancing blows of Jan Berry's more recent report show that lots of good ideas are flagged up, but that they are not followed through by Ministers. Let us take one example—forgive me if this seems to be a bit anoraky. The disclosure rules in the Manual of Guidance 6 form—the very long forms that police officers have to fill in as disclosure officers—are a huge bugbear. The

Police Federation and the Police Superintendents Association, in short, ask whether such work could be better done by Crown Prosecution Service lawyers, who have to review these long forms anyway. Why does an officer have to do it? Why does the legislation make disclosure a requirement on a police officer when it would be better and more quickly done with more of a legal eye by non-police officers?

Flanagan talks about that in his final report on disclosure, which, of course, has a read-across to wider parts of the criminal justice system. However, we have not heard anything about that matter. We have already said on the record that we would favour shifting the burden to CPS lawyers—although we would have to pilot that—as a practical, simple and explicit way of reducing some of the more burdensome forms, specifically the part of the MG6 suite of forms that refers to disclosure of evidence.

A further issue that crops up is the need to reform statutory charging, for which Her Majesty's Opposition have been arguing for more than two years—well before Flanagan. The statutory charging regime was introduced in 2004 and, in simple terms, it required a bigger role for the CPS to make charging decisions and, in relation to large swathes of offences, it removed the discretion that a custody sergeant had to make a charge. The proposal that we made, Flanagan made and, I believe, Jan Berry is also looking at, is to try to return more charging discretion to custody sergeants.

Certainly, charging sergeants should be able to make a decision in relation to all summary offences and they should not have to make any reference to the CPS unless they particularly want to. A large number of triable-either-way offences need to be explicitly set down as being a matter on which custody sergeants can make the charging decision, without having an obligation to go to the CPS to authorise a charge. I do not think that anyone is suggesting that indictable-only offences should be a matter just for custody sergeants, but there certainly needs to be radical reform. We need to go back more to the pre-2004 position, which was before statutory charging came in, and give custody sergeants more discretion. That would mean less file and pre-charge file building and would save time. I would be grateful to hear what the Minister has to say about that, particularly considering his experience in a former life at the Ministry of Justice.

Another totemic form is the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 form—the authorisation for direct and other related forms of surveillance. No one pretends that the RIPA forms are used as frequently as some of the MG suite of forms. On average, police officers obtain between 20,000 and 25,000 authorisations a year under RIPA. However, the RIPA forms are a totemic example of unnecessary bureaucracy. Under a strict interpretation of RIPA, if a police officer wants to conduct a walk-by of the house of someone who is going to be arrested later in the day, they have to fill in a form. The Police Superintendents Association has given evidence in relation to the matter and has spoken to one of the Minister's predecessors about it. We think that we should amend the RIPA codes—the statutory codes—to make it clear that, in certain situations, RIPA authorisation will not be necessary. Again, I would be grateful to hear from the Minister what progress has been made on that, in particular the Police Superintendents Association's representation about two years ago to the right hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), who was then a Minister of State at the Home Office, on the specific point about reforming the RIPA codes.

I shall not detain the House with detail about stop-and account and stop and search, save to say that Her Majesty's Opposition as long ago as 2005 believed that the stop-and-account form should be abolished in totality—but not the stop-and-search. That now seems to be a mainstream view. It would save hundreds of thousands of police hours each year. Also, we suggested finding a way to record the key information that will always be necessary for an intrusive procedure such as stop-and-search in a more user-friendly way. Digitised recordings are an obvious way of doing that, and we welcome the signs that progress is being made along those lines.

To reduce police bureaucracy, we really must get to grips with the Staffordshire pilot. There were also pilots in the west midlands, Leicestershire and Surrey, which were spoken about eloquently earlier. To crystallise the point, we all know of examples from many police forces of two 16-year-olds having a scuffle in a playground. The police are called and an offence of common assault might be disclosed by the facts—two young people shoving each other in the playground. Typically, in the past few years, that would have given rise to a requirement on the officer to start filling in forms and to record a crime. The four pilots suggested that a police officer could use his or her discretion and look for a solution that did not involve recording a crime. In the example that I gave, an apology could be offered, or the parents could be called in. Such solutions do not require treating the incident as a crime, with the full panoply of forms that are required.

What has not been said in this debate but which I think is important is that using discretion, as in the Staffordshire and other pilots, has its risks. Some of the officers who were involved in the pilots said that if they did not write down the details of the action that they took when called to an alleged incident and something went wrong subsequently, they would not have any back-up or paperwork if all they did was give a verbal dispensation or come to an agreement not to take the matter further. That is a real issue that police representative bodies have discussed with me.

Of course the main thrust should be to allow more discretion and less paperwork, but let us also understand that officers will need to be trained in the use of discretion. It is not just a question of saying to them, "Go out and use your discretion," because it is not quite as simple as that. Some officers feel that filling in the forms gives them the necessary protection if something goes wrong a week or a month later. We should not play party politics or pretend that there is a simple answer. We must be sensitive to what the police representative bodies are saying on the matter.

Yes, Her Majesty's Opposition unambiguously want a national roll-out of the Staffordshire model—we do not want pilots—and I would like to hear from the Minister what he, his colleagues and his predecessors have been doing to ensure that the model is more widely adopted, but also, having regard to my point, understanding that officers, many of whom might be quite young, need to be inculcated in the use of discretion when for so long they have always had the crutch of paperwork, if I can put it that way, to protect them in the event of

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someone challenging their exercise of discretion. Not enough has been said about that, which is why I particularly wanted to flag it up. The model is great, but extra work needs to be done to ensure that police officers' careers are protected and that they are not accused of using discretion wrongly or in a way that gives rise to problems later on.

I close my remarks on reducing police bureaucracy, in which we all have an interest, by saying that it is not clear that we have cracked the nut of national targets, which are routinely complained about by all parties. The dreaded police performance assessment framework league tables have been superseded by the new analysis of policing and community safety framework. It is not immediately clear to me that the APACS framework is cutting the targetry and target-chasing that constabularies have to engage in. The chief constable of Greater Manchester police, Peter Fahy, without specifically referring to APACS, said that the national targetry burden on his and other forces is still there.

I would like to hear from the Minister what progress has been made on APACS. My understanding is that the PPAF and APACS frameworks will run in tandem this year as a dual system, and then APACS will kick in. How much time will the new system save the average force, compared with the PPAF system, given all the data collection that is implicit in both systems? Why is APACS better? Is it better? Can he tell us how it is better in terms of less targetry?

Having given a flavour of the need for some answers on police bureaucracy, which was admirably dealt with by the Home Affairs Committee, my next point is about the policing costs of dealing with immigration, which is touched on in the report. I shall not detain the House too long, except to say that a report by KPMG in September 2007 on the Cambridge constabulary concluded that Cambridgeshire required an additional 100 police officers to cover the additional work load generated by policing foreign nationals. That is from the report "The changing demography of Cambridgeshire". There are strains on police resources for all kinds of reasons, but the issues raised by the chief constable of Cambridgeshire were correctly identified. The Minister should tell us what the position is on that, and also on translation services, interpreter services and so on.

Of course, pressure on police resources is caused not just by policing immigration. There is a tight budgetary settlement in this country for reasons that we do not really need to dilate on today. There will be pressures, whoever the Government are, on funding our great public services. Let us not forget that the police service is one of our great institutions. None of the chief constables to whom I speak or who gave evidence to the Select Committee could hide the fact that the police feel that their ability to do the job of keeping us safe, preventing crime and enforcing our laws is made more difficult in a tight budgetary environment.

Without arguing about how much will be put in budgets or freezes or any of that, I would like to flag up how, in a consensual way, we can get more bang for the existing buck. How can we make existing resources work better? Collaboration, which was touched on in the report, is so important. On page 4 the report states:

"Regional collaboration works well in some parts of England and Wales, but progress elsewhere is too slow."

That is correct. Collaboration is the big game in town and will be for a long time, in the light of the fact that the strategic merger proposition of this Government failed and will not be revisited by Her Majesty's Opposition. It will not, as far as I am aware, be revisited by Her Majesty's Government, which is why there was some general agreement between the Opposition and the Minister's predecessor about how we close the level 2 gap. That cannot be done by strategic merger, so collaboration is the way to do it.

In this context, it is important to mention clause 5 of the Policing and Crime Bill, which is going through Parliament this year and is important because it clearly gives new, unambiguous powers to Ministers, of whatever political persuasion, to mandate collaboration agreements. Without spelling out what has to be mandated in a collaboration agreement, there are some detailed provisions involved, which I took the Minister's predecessor through in Committee.

We have already seen good, obvious examples where collaboration really should be taking place throughout the country and not in an ad hoc way. The Kent and Essex model, which is delivering huge recurrent savings, allowing new fully warranted officers to be hired and put on the front line, has been built around those counties sharing back-office services, including payroll, training and so on. The Policing and Crime Bill, which this Government are putting through Parliament and which we support, is important because it will give Ministers, potentially, the power to mandate these excellent efficiency-saving agreements. There has to be a huge debate about how that power in the Bill might be used in future. That is clearly the right way to go, but I should be interested to hear what the Minister and his Home Office colleagues are doing about mandating collaboration.

The Chairman of the Committee dealt thoroughly and in great detail with alcohol-related crime. The most recent British crime survey, published in July last year, showed that 45 per cent. of all victims of violence described their assailant as being under the influence of alcohol at the time. We have also heard in this debate—I agree with the sentiments expressed—about the preponderance of cheap alcohol and we know about the problems that this causes. More generally, the extended licensing hours that the Government brought in under the Licensing Act 2003 have probably compounded the problem of alcohol-related crime. It would be interesting to hear whether the Minister believes, finally, that there is a legal basis for banning the use of loss-leading alcohol sales by supermarkets. That specific point was raised in the Committee's report and it would be useful to get a clear steer from the Minister on that. Her Majesty's Opposition believe that there must be an urgent review the appropriateness of the law on extended licensing and 24-hour drinking in towns and cities.

The report also touches on the crucial importance of engaging the British public more widely in what the priorities are for their police and how policing is delivered. That goes to the heart of the points on local accountability that were raised earlier in this debate. The report says bluntly in its introduction:

"Public expectations of the police are not being met."

The most recent British crime survey found that, across the country, only 48 per cent. of people had confidence

in the police and local authorities to deal with crime and antisocial behaviour. There are figures showing higher public confidence in various police forces, although there is no magical number, but let us just agree that there is always room for improvement. Lots of constabularies have high levels of confidence and respect emanating from the local populace, but it could be better.

The proposals to reform local police authorities advanced by the Government last year were dropped. I will not rehearse the reasons for that. Her Majesty's Opposition believe that there must be a much clearer line of direct accountability that the British public can exercise when judging and directing how policing is done. It really is a case of power to the people in this respect. We have a proposal for a lay commissioner, not a police officer, to be elected for each constabulary force area. With regard to the events of the past few weeks in this place, the public expect the governing classes—in the most general sense—to be more responsive, transparent and open. That expectation might also extend to large parts of public service, including the health service and the police service. This debate needs to be had. We Conservatives have our own model, the Liberal Democrats have a separate model and the Labour Government have asked the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside (Mr. Blunkett) to do some work as well. In short, we all believe that the current police authority model, which is an indirectly-plus-nominated model of 17 men and women—with a slightly higher number in the London Metropolitan Police Authority—has to change, because it is not delivering the clear line of accountability that the public require. It is about not what we politicians and Members of Parliament think is needed, but what the public require. It is important that there is another report in the coming months showing what further evidence the Committee has taken on a more direct, accountable model for holding the police service locally to account.

This is an important debate and an important report. I have picked out some of the issues thrown up by this report that particularly exercise Her Majesty's Opposition. I look forward to the Minister's giving specific replies to some of the specific, although not exhaustive, questions that I have posed.

4.7 pm

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. David Hanson): May I thank colleagues for the consensual and helpful way in which they have framed today's debate? There are key issues that we need to address in government, with the support of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, and the hon. Members for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) and for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes), as Opposition spokesmen.

You will understand, Mr. Williams, that I am in day three of my tenure as Minister with responsibility for security, counter-terrorism, crime and policing. I hope that my experience as Minister with responsibility for prisons, probation and youth justice will help me to understand some of the complexities of the issues before me. Having been involved in that work for the past two and a half years, and having dealt with security issues in a previous role in Northern Ireland, it is interesting to see things through the prism of the last three days in my new area of responsibility—I hope that I can do justice to it.

I am grateful for the tributes that have been paid to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), who has gone on to other activities in government as the Minister of State, Department for Children, Schools and Families. I am also grateful to those who mentioned my right hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), who has returned to the Back Benches, but will undoubtedly occasionally contribute to debates on these issues in due course.

I will try to answer the points that have been mentioned in broad terms by right hon. and hon. Members, but I begin by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East for the work on this matter that he has done on the Committee. He will know that we have been able to accept many of the recommendations, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, who was the author of the Government's response, acknowledged not only that my right hon. Friend and his team did tremendous work, but that their suggestions were sensible. We have been able to accept some of them but, as always, not all. However, I will continue to keep them under review because I believe in examining problems day by day. As hon. Members have said, the challenges for policing change regularly.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield, like my right hon. Friend, mentioned things that are happening now that we would never have considered 10, 11, 12 or 15 years ago, such as internet grooming and contact, child sex trafficking, and even—dare I say it?—gun and knife crime. When I was first elected to the House 17 and a half years ago, such issues were not on the radar of Members of Parliament. I know from my experience as the Minister with responsibility for prisons and probation that even during that time fresh challenges came before me that we had to examine and deal with. This important report is a snapshot of where we are now, but it will never be a static document. We will work on the issues that we have accepted, and we will continue to be aware of those that we have rejected and today's debate. The report addressed a range of issues that hon. Members have raised this afternoon, such as collaboration, police numbers, capacity performance indicators, reducing bureaucracy, improvements in technology, the need to increase productivity and efficiency, diversity, alcohol and police numbers, all of which I will try to touch on.

This morning, I had the privilege of addressing the Local Government Association for the first time as the Minister with responsibility for policing. I tried to set out some themes that are important for me to consider during whatever time I have in this post. I am pleased that they were echoed by some of the themes in the debate. Whatever is happening at the moment, local accountability is vital. The people who know best about policing in my constituency are not just the chief constable and those on the police authority, but the local basic unit commander and beat managers. Sometimes the local community needs a better way of engaging with the police on accountability.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced some weeks ago an examination of some of those issues in a White Paper to be produced in the autumn. I have a blank page for those issues. Sensible suggestions are being debated across the board in all communities, and

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we will consider them and return to the accountability issue during my tenure in this post.

This morning, I mentioned visibility, which is extremely important. It was also mentioned by hon. Members this afternoon. That includes how to make policing visible, how to make people feel engaged, and how to show people locally what local police forces achieve. Partnership is also extremely important. In his report, Ronnie Flanagan, to whom I pay tribute, indicated strongly that crime reduction cannot be achieved only by the police. The actions of the local council, the local fire brigade, neighbourhood wardens, community groups and local representatives are as important as what the police do.

This morning, I also mentioned delivery. We want positive outcomes, but not just for crime reduction. To deliver, we must take on board the very points that have been mentioned across the board today about bureaucracy. We also need to ensure that we have an efficient front line and that the whole system is about what happens on the front line, with support from chief constables and Ministers down. We agree on some of the synergies, and although we might have different views on some issues, which will be open for debate, the common themes in the report are accountability, visibility, partnership, delivery and reducing bureaucracy, as they were in the contributions that I was happy to hear from the two Opposition Front-Benchers.

An important issue that has permeated our debate is public confidence in policing, and how we tackle that and ensure that justice is delivered. Right hon. and hon. Members will know better than me—they have been debating the matter longer than I have been in my new role—that the new relationship between the police and the public on the policing pledge provides an opportunity to hold the police to account for what they need to do. We must consider how to respond to local expectations. For the first time, the public can have a real and clear expectation of the standards of service from the local police. Communities, especially through neighbourhood policing teams, should be able to see how we are working positively on that. My constituency, which covers the same police authority as yours in north Wales, Mr. Williams, has crime mapping, which is helpful. We consider what we are doing in a local area to tackle crime on the ground. The hon. Member for Chesterfield said that that is an important contribution, and it is important generally.

A central question was how we consider targets. The Government have moved their position, perhaps because of contributions on targets. We have scrapped top-down targets, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East and the hon. Members for Chesterfield and for Bury St. Edmunds said. That is a key to improving public confidence. The new single confidence target will measure the success of the policing pledge, and ensure that partnership working happens locally.

Jan Berry's work on behalf of the Government to examine bureaucracy is ongoing and important. It will be a key factor for me when ensuring that we streamline still further, as was Ronnie Flanagan's work. Public confidence in the police will depend on how well communities believe that the police work for them. Helpful comments and suggestions were made today about the report.

It is important to recognise—I am grateful for the comments of all three Members who have spoken—that the police do a very good job. I spent Tuesday morning in Croydon with not just the borough commander and the local beat officers on an estate in Addington, but police community support officers. They were not only engaged in visible policing—walking and taking initiatives on the ground—but were in discussion with a local head teacher, and working with local neighbourhood wardens and with teenage groups at the effective local youth club groups. In the evening, they were organising Crystal Palace football club's local activities. Such alternative activities are important and should be recognised. Such a positive role is mirrored throughout England and Wales, often in difficult circumstances. The work of the police, community support officers and other people who give their time as councillors and officials is extremely valuable.

We should never forget that all that work—the hon. Member for Chesterfield touched on this—has real value on the ground. A key issue that was mentioned is perception. We cannot get away from the fact that crime is down by 39 per cent., robbery has fallen by 18 per cent., burglary is down, and car crime is down, but perception goes to the heart of all the issues that I mentioned: visibility, accountability, delivery and ownership of the problems and challenges in local areas. We should be proud of some of our successes, such as the 55 per cent. reduction in burglary over the past 12 years, but I am acutely aware—this was particularly the case when my car was stolen at Flint railway station—that when crime happens to an individual, that is 100 per cent. for the victim and their family, not in the context of a 55 per cent. reduction. We must examine how to build public consensus and understanding, and how to deal with such issues positively.

A number of initiatives are driving things forward, such the youth crime action plan in 70 authorities, which has received lots of money. Only on Tuesday, London authorities received £4.5 million to tackle youth and knife crime. We are trying to focus on key areas. We must build on a lot of the good work that is being done, and not only by the Home Office, for which I now have responsibility, by bringing in other Departments—I am trying to do that across Government, as the report suggests—including the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department of Health to tackle the issues holistically.

Hon. and right hon. Members, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East, have said that addressing antisocial behaviour is key in this area. Once again, the role of local councils, using a range of tools and powers, is especially important in that regard. Those tools and powers do not just include the well-tried antisocial behaviour orders, acceptable behaviour contracts and fixed penalty notices. Local councils also have a role as partners in this process, which the Select Committee report reflected on and encouraged, and we need to do more to promote that.

The three Members who spoke today all expressed particular concern about the issue of alcohol. They also spoke about the need for us to look imaginatively at how we can tackle some of the alcohol-driven crime that causes antisocial behaviour on the ground and

leads, in many instances, to some of the hidden crimes of violence in the home that are extremely serious and extremely worrying.

For example, it was asked why we had not taken forward the plan for a minimum price for alcohol—my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East mentioned that in particular. He will know that the Government announced in December 2008 that we had decided not to proceed with that. However, that does not mean that alcohol, including alcohol sales and alcohol-related crimes, is not important. Hon. Members will know that we have recently published a further document for discussion on alcohol sales in general—I have a copy here. It was launched only two weeks ago and covers a range of consultations on how we can examine some of the key issues involved in alcohol-related behaviour and crime. We have looked at important issues, which have been mentioned, relating to happy hour drinking, women-only drinking nights, alcohol sales in general, and off and on-trade premises. We are also looking at how we can promote responsible sales of alcohol, rather than the irresponsible sales that cause us great difficulty. I hope that there will be a solid debate about those issues and I am certain that we will discuss them in due course—whether in this Chamber or elsewhere—as we have done in the past.

It is important that we recognise that we should not penalise the many people who drink responsibly. However, I am acutely aware of the fact that for young people, in some cases, and for many older people alcohol can be a driver of crime and poor behaviour. We are considering proposing discretionary conditions, including further restrictions on drinks promotions, which I have already mentioned. We are also looking at simple issues, such as safer alternatives to glassware and allowing local transport information to be displayed in licensed premises, which would help individuals to avoid one of the big problems that I came across as a Justice Minister: the consequences of death and injury caused by drink-driving. Although there are challenges, we can meet them, and I will welcome debate about them.

The question of bureaucracy in policing has been mentioned—indeed, it has been a common theme in the debate. Through the work of Jan Berry and Ronnie Flanagan, we have opportunities to address that issue. I am extremely aware that we must continue to look at how we can free up the police from the bureaucracy that they face as part of the work that they undertake. It is important that police officers have the skills, opportunities for development and support to concentrate on their primary duties, which are detecting and driving down crime, increasing public confidence and helping to support the community. We must also ensure that they not only use their own skills and abilities but, as has been mentioned, make greater use of quality IT, where appropriate, and support mechanisms so that we reduce red tape and give them the discretion locally to undertake their activities positively.

Hon. Members will know that the Government have scrapped activity-based costings. We have also stopped, or significantly reduced, 36 data collection requirements and supported all forces to streamline crime recording processes. Furthermore, as has already been mentioned, we scrapped the lengthy stop-and-account form on 1 January 2009, which I think has been genuinely welcomed. It might well have been suggested by the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds before that date but, then again, good ideas never have an ownership that cannot be taken by somebody else.

Keith Vaz: The Minister has been rattling through his initiatives so quickly that he might have already dealt with this point. However, the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) raised a point that was also raised in our report about Staffordshire and the need to have good practice implemented immediately, so that when a police force is doing a good job, we can share that practice rather than waiting to do so.

Mr. Hanson: Once again I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I am trying to give an overview of some of the activities that have been undertaken to date. He will know—again, this point was mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds—that the pilots that were conducted last year in Surrey, Leicestershire, Staffordshire and the west midlands have been shown to have benefits. We certainly need to look at those pilots very positively. Our challenge is to build on that work by working with Jan Berry and, without making any other commitments, I undertake to look at the issues arising from this debate in the next couple of days. As I have said, three days into the job, I need to make some assessment so that the points I have made have greater validity.

Keith Vaz: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way a second time. He started off with Minister-speak, clearly because he has been in his new role for two days, and ended up by saying that he will look at this issue of good practice in the next couple of days. It sounded like the fastest timetable in history. Obviously we do not want the Minister to make a decision today, in the middle of this debate. All that I ask is that he revisit this issue quickly, because good practice needs to be put into effect immediately. If he could revisit that issue and perhaps write to me in the near future, I would be most grateful.

Mr. Hanson: I will give my right hon. Friend a positive and solid undertaking that I will look at all the suggestions that have been made in this debate. I will also read the debate when it is published in *Hansard*. I will look at the points that have been made and try to reflect on them. As the Minister—the person where the buck stops—I have to make judgments on these issues, with colleagues, including officials. Three days into this job, I have a range of issues to look at and a range of assessments to make. However, I know that I also have a maximum of 11 months in this post until there is a general election. In that time, I can look at these key issues and I will have an opportunity to affect some of them; I have already tried to flag some up to those right hon. and hon. Members who are here today. Those issues are related to accountability, visibility, bureaucracy and how we deliver in due course.

I want to try to cover some of the other points that have been mentioned. The hon. Member for Chesterfield talked in great detail about the issue of funding. Again, that is an issue that I must look at in the next few weeks and months, to address some of the key challenges that we face. We have a commitment to police finances for 2010 and 2011. The Minister of State, Department for Children, Schools and Families, my hon. Friend the

[Mr. Hanson]

Member for Gedling, when he was in my post, previously gave commitments that the financial settlement for the police will not be reopened. This year alone, about £9.5 billion is being spent in England and Wales on addressing the issues that we have discussed. I do not know what the public finances will be in the future and I do not know what will ultimately happen in relation to decisions that are taken downstream. However, there is certainly a commitment to maintain the current position on police funding for the future.

As part of our discussions, some difficult decisions have been taken about capping, in relation to police funding in Surrey and in Derbyshire. We have made it very clear, in relation to the Department for Communities and Local Government and previously in relation to the Home Office, in every year since 2004-05 that capping action would be taken if the Government judged that there was a need for that action. Again, that is a debate that we have had today.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield made legitimate points about funding issues. We have to examine those issues across Government and consider how they are being dealt with. However, we have taken decisions in that reflect the fact that there is a need, in certain circumstances, to cap to protect taxpayers from excessive increases in spending to deal with these issues. Ultimately, this is all related to the discussions that we must have about the accountability and other issues that may arise in relation to the forthcoming White Paper. These are real issues, which I know the hon. Gentleman will continue to press me on in general terms.

The hon. Gentleman will know that we hope to undertake a consultation in the very near future the funding formula for next year. We will look at that funding formula as part of the wider comprehensive spending review for the next three years. That important issue will remain on the table and up for discussion, and there will be a range of views expressed about it in due course.

I think that the hon. Gentleman suggested that there may well be some central direction to the funding that goes to police authorities. In fact, there is no central direction of any note on those issues. All the money is unhypothecated. Police authorities and chief constables can spend it in whichever way they wish. That is part of the localism that I shall continue to encourage. It involves people looking at what is happening at local level and how that can be undertaken in a way that meets the needs.

The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds raised a couple of other key issues that I want to touch on. The first relates to police charging. I acknowledge that charging processes need to be reformed. My predecessor committed to that in the past. That is why we introduced statutory charging in the first place, and that has generally been a success. We will work with Jan Berry to consider those issues still further.

With regard to the RIPA code of practice, a public consultation is under way, as the hon. Gentleman will know. I need to examine the detailed results of that consultation. I will have to make decisions and would welcome a contribution outside this Chamber from the hon. Members present, who are key players in what I hope will ultimately be the gaining of consensus on how we deal with the issue. From my perspective, we need to have consensus if we can.

I have a couple of further points, which are a bit random but which relate to valuable points made by hon. Members during the debate. My right hon. Friend talked about whether Airwave would prove to be a success. There will be Airwave requirements in line with Olympic security plans. We are considering the final requirement, and that is nearly complete. I will certainly keep him informed of progress on that and I look forward to working with him in relation to it.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the forthcoming inquiry, which I welcome and will have to participate in, on the role of SOCA and the general objectives with regard to its future effectiveness. SOCA has brought together key players in relation to direct practices and working practices to tackle serious organised crime. Self-evidently, we need to keep it under review. There will shortly be changes in part of the leadership of SOCA with the retirement of Sir Stephen Lander. I will certainly welcome the contribution of the Select Committee in putting issues to us, but with regard to day-to-day of serious organised crime of a pan-European nature, I have already, in my first few days in this post, seen very interesting operations involving SOCA.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield talked about whether we should give the collection of crime statistics to an independent body. When I was in the Ministry of Justice, there was a Chinese wall between Ministers and the Department in relation to many of the statistics that I saw and that were published by the Government—this applies not just to the MOJ, but to the Home Office—even though the Department often produced some of the statistics. There are already strict rules on statistics. Home Office statistics in particular are designated national statistics and therefore, like MOJ statistics, are subject to strict standards that prevent political comment on them before their publication. Often I have had statistics as a Minister that are about the performance of the Department for which I am responsible and that I have seen only 24 hours in advance of their publication. There is independence already and the Government have strengthened that with the establishment of the Statistics Authority—an independent body at arm's length from Government.

The migration impact fund that was mentioned does exist in full. All police authorities can apply to it for funds. We have spent £70 million over two years in the UK. Many local services are submitting proposals for funding, and the Government are considering them.

I think that I have covered the vast majority of the points that I wished to cover. My final point relates to what my right hon. Friend said about the investigation of the allegations that have been made about Metropolitan police officers in Enfield. He will know that as a Minister I am not able to comment on that at the moment. The matter has gone to the Independent Police Complaints Commission for investigation. I know that the IPCC will examine it in detail. I will obviously reflect in due course on the outcome of the investigation, but self-evidently there are serious allegations that need to be investigated and the IPCC is best placed to do that investigation.

I will read the record of the debate in detail and reflect on all the points that have been made. If I have not answered points raised today, I will consider them

and send letters to hon. Members who are here today. I give a commitment, as the new Minister, with regard to the great challenge that we face. We have an opportunity in the next weeks and months to consider how we can improve accountability, visibility and delivery and ensure that we make efforts collectively that reduce crime and increase public confidence.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for the report. I look forward to appearing before him again, as I did on, I think, three occasions as an MOJ Minister, and I look forward to friendly battles but also co-operation with the hon. Members for Bury St. Edmunds and for Chesterfield and their respective shadow Secretaries of State. I thank you for your chairmanship today, Mr. Williams.

4.36 pm

Keith Vaz: With the leave of the House, I shall respond. I do not intend to detain the House. I just want to thank all right hon. and hon. Members and shadow spokespersons for taking part in the debate. I am getting a bit worried about home affairs. We had a very consensual debate on knife crime earlier this week, and here we have that again. Of course, it will not be the norm, but we have raised a number of points. I paid tribute to members of my Committee when I spoke on the last occasion, and I should like now to pay tribute to the Select Committee staff, who worked extremely hard in the preparation of the report. All the credit goes to hon. Members, because we sign these reports, but the staff work very hard. As the Clerk to the Committee has come into the Chamber and is at the Table, and as she keeps us all in order in the Committee, I think that that is where I should leave my contribution. We will return to this issue, because policing is a crucial aspect of Government policy. I look forward to debating these subjects with hon. Members in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

4.37 pm

Sitting adjourned.